A second extension of the truce, lasting one day, came into force early Thursday. But the lull in fighting also sharpens the moral, political and military dilemmas that will play out in the almost inevitable return to full-scale hostilities – including some apparent strategic and humanitarian differences of emphasis between the Biden administration and the Israeli government.

While the truce has so far been surprisingly successful – given that it is taking place with both Israel and Hamas seeking the other’s elimination – there is an unmistakable sense that a fateful moment is approaching within days when Israel will decide on how long it can hold off its scorching military offensive.

That means the debate about what happens next in Gaza is increasingly urgent, even as the US seeks to extend the pause in fighting in the medium term and Israel seeks to temper expectations of restraint in the days to come.These profound questions are also taking place against a backdrop of deepening tragedy in a cruel war, even if the emergence of hostages has offered fleeting moments of joy amid the horror. In one wrenching development on Wednesday, Israel said it was looking into a claim that the youngest Israeli hostage, 10-month-old Kfir Bibas, his brother and his mother are no longer alive. Uncertainty, meanwhile, surrounds the future of the remaining hostages, mostly male, that Israel believes remain in Gaza. The humanitarian crisis in the territory is worsening with the World Health Organization warning that more Gazans could die from disease than bombing if an already rudimentary health service is not urgently repaired. And as growing unrest rocks the occupied West Bank, the Israeli military killed two Palestinian children when it opened fire in the city of Jenin, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health – the latest of more than 240 Palestinians that the ministry says have been killed by Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank since October 7.

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Will Israel listen to US pleas for a more surgical approach?

Israel has made no secret of its aim since the October 7 Hamas terror attacks that killed 1,200 people — the irrevocable eradication of the Islamist group designated by the US as a terror organization, which controls the Gaza Strip. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government viewed the Hamas attacks as an existential threat to Israel and the Jewish people and argues it has no choice but to crush Hamas completely.The Israeli leader on Wednesday dismissed the idea that the prolonged pause in fighting would make it more difficult strategically and morally for Israel to resume its relentless action against Hamas. “Over the past few days I’ve been hearing this question – will Israel go back to fighting after maximizing this phase of returning our hostages? So my answer is unequivocal – Yes,” he said.

But Israel’s initial assault on Hamas led to huge civilian carnage in the densely populated Palestinian enclave in the first phase of the war, sending tens of thousands of protesters into the streets in the US and across the world while heaping political pressure on President Joe Biden from inside his own electoral coalition.

The likely prospect that a second wave Israeli offensive against Hamas strongholds in southern Gaza would be even more bloody now threatens to open gaps between Washington and Netanyahu’s government and military leaders. CNN’s MJ Lee, Jennifer Hansler and Katie Bo Lillis reported Wednesday that US officials, including Biden, told the Israelis they don’t want to see a repeat of air strikes that led to massive destruction and terrible scenes of civilian casualties. Israel must be more “cautious, more careful, more deliberate and more precise in their targeting,” one senior administration official said.In the days after the October 7 attacks, Biden hugged Israel and Netanyahu close, traveling to the Jewish state to mourn with the victims of the horror. Will the Israeli prime minister pay any more attention to Biden’s entreaty to do more to protect Palestinian civilians than the passing consideration that he gave it in the first days of the conflict?

This is an issue likely to lead to intense discussions on Thursday between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who’s in Israel, and top Israeli officials.

Israel’s moral and military dilemmas

The Israeli government is being pulled in two directions that may be irreconcilable – the desire to get all of the hostages back and the incentive to press on with its military operation after a pause that offered Hamas a chance to regroup and prepare for a new assault.At home, the Israeli prime minister, beset by deep unpopularity after the surprise Hamas attacks, is also being pulled between growing political pressures from hostage families, who want their loved ones released, and his right-wing coalition members, who are advocating for harsh action amid frustration that the pause has allowed Hamas to use hostages to regain control of the tempo of the crisis. And Netanyahu also faces the growing possibility of a clash between his desire to target Hamas and US anxiety over another round of huge civilian casualties in Gaza. American support would be even more crucial for Israel in a second phase of fighting because foreign powers are likely to strongly criticize the Netanyahu government if it is seen to re-ignite hostilities.

Israel’s heavy-handed military tactics are also coming under scrutiny amid fears that more civilian casualties will seed a new generation of fury against the Jewish state that will eventually translate into recruitment for extremist groups and terrorism.

Retired US Army Lt. Col. Daniel Davis noted that the Israeli leader sees the elimination of Hamas as the key to bringing peace to Israel but warned, “What he is doing with the military will not bring that peace.” He told Kasie Hunt on CNN International’s “State of the Race” that “I’ve seen it myself in Afghanistan several times, to where the more Taliban you kill, the more the enemy, the more you make, especially when you’re killing so many people.”

Israel says that it takes pains to avoid killing civilians. Hamas has embedded its forces within the civilian population, using infrastructure like hospitals and apartment blocks as cover. Senior Israeli figures argue that while Washington wants to see more forensic targeting of Hamas if the battle resumes, such an approach is not always feasible given conditions in Gaza.civilians it sent to southern Gaza early in the war to head back north, one senior US official told CNN. Multiple officials have also raised the need for the creation of safe zones for civilians in the south, CNN reported. But there are practical difficulties with such a plan. For one thing, swathes of northern Gaza have been devastated by the Israeli advance, as new drone footage of mile upon mile of buildings turned into rubble shows. In an enclave surrounded by Israel and with the border to Egypt closed, there is nowhere for millions of people to go.

While a debate is boiling over the tactics to be used in a second phase of the war, the very idea of starting the fighting again while hostages are still being held by Hamas is horrifying family members of those still held. The pause in the fighting over the last week has offered both Netanyahu and Biden some political relief on this issue but that would end as soon as the guns begin firing.

Yehuda Beinin – the father of Liat Beinin, a dual US-Israeli national freed by Hamas on Wednesday – voiced a growing concern among hostage families that the remaining hostages are not the first priority of Netanyahu’s government. “This naturally would create a great deal of fear that the hostages will again come under some kind of danger, as a result of renewed Israeli bombing,” said Beinin, whose son-in-law Aviv Atzili, is still believed to be a hostage.

Biden administration steps up diplomacy

The Biden administration’s current priorities are:A further extension of the truce.

—  The release of all the hostages from Gaza.

—  The alleviation of a horrendous humanitarian crisis in the enclave.

—  Supporting Israel’s effort to prevent future terror attacks.

—  Turning the focus toward post-war governance of Gaza ahead of an effort to tackle the long-dormant question of diplomacy to halt the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Potential difficulties with Israel lie in the fact that such goals – or their urgency – may not always intersect with those of the Netanyahu government. Biden has a huge stake in the conflict for humanitarian, political and geopolitical reasons. The president noted in a statement on Wednesday that the US, along with Qatar, had been instrumental in negotiating the pause that had freed scores of hostages, and delivered substantial humanitarian aid to help “the innocent people of Gaza.”

Biden’s support for Netanyahu has cost him politically at home and abroad. US foreign policy goals in the Arab world and elsewhere risk being compromised as governments react to outrage at the civilian death toll in Gaza. Core initiatives like the bid to cement peace between Israel and Arab states have been seriously damaged. Domestically, scenes of Palestinian deaths have split the Democratic Party and raised fears over whether younger and more progressive voters already cool toward Biden will show up in the numbers he needs in November 2024. Less of a concern, but still significant, are attacks from Republicans at the first sign he is trying to constrain Netanyahu.

While there is no sense that unshakable US support for Israel is at risk, the real danger of growing differences between the two governments about the future conduct of the war could introduce new tensions into the relationship.

The vital national interests of the United States and Israel are not always or irrevocably aligned. So whether Netanyahu has political room to maneuver on military strategy or the inclination to ease some of the pressure on Biden will be closely watched in the coming days.

How far will Israel go in testing Biden’s loyalty, forbearance and political viability if the war heats up again? And if push comes to shove, will Netanyahu’s desire to eliminate Hamas override all other considerations?

The seven-day Israel-Hamas truce ended on Friday after negotiations reached an impasse and Israel accused the Palestinian militant group of violating the agreement by firing at IsraelThe nearly eight-week war that preceded the lull in fighting caused widespread destruction and saw more than 14,800 people killed in Gaza, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in the West Bank, which draws its data from Hamas-run health authorities in the Gaza Strip. For the next round of fighting, however, the United States has made it clear to Israel that scale of devastation should not be repeated.Whether Israel will listen is a different matter. Analysts say the war is bound to continue until Hamas is crushed, and it may be much fiercer this time.

The Israeli military’s announcement about the resumption in fighting came moments after the truce between Israel and Hamas expired. The deal saw the warring parties exchange hostages held in Gaza for Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week vowed that Israel would fight until the end. His government had informed the US before the truce ended that it intended eventually to turn its focus on the southern part of the enclave after fighting resumed.

Benny Gantz, who is part of the war cabinet, said Wednesday the fighting would “expand to wherever it is needed throughout the Strip. There will be no cities of refuge.”It is unclear if there will be another truce, but with more than 100 hostages still in Hamas captivity, it could theoretically be revived for several days if both parties agree to extend by one day for every 10 hostages released, analysts said.

The deal, however, primarily included women and children. Of the 137 people Israel believes are still in Hamas captivity, 20 are women and 2 are under the age of 18, the prime minister’s office said Friday.During its October 7 attack, Hamas killed more than 1,200 in Israel and kidnapped about 240 others, Israeli authorities said.Negotiations with Qatari and Egyptian mediators over the release of hostages held are ongoing, a source familiar with the talks told CNN, even after Israel’s announcement that it is resuming its operation.

Israel has paid “a big price” for the pause in fighting, Yaakov Amidror, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies, who was previously National Security Adviser to Netanyahu, told CNN, noting that the truce “broke the momentum of the IDF and gave Hamas the ability to regroup.”

“We understood that, and we were ready to pay that price, because it is a price that should be paid for releasing the hostages,” he said, adding that Israel is prepared for more intense fighting to make up for lost time.

What happens next?

The US now is piling pressure on Israel to avoid mass civilian casualties in the next round of fighting.“I underscored the imperative of the United States that the massive loss of civilian life and displacement of the scale that we saw in northern Gaza not be repeated in the south,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a televised news conference in Tel Aviv on Thursday.

Blinken said he “made clear” to Israel that it must put in place humanitarian protection plans and safeguard hospitals, power stations and facilities. He said Netanyahu had agreed to take steps to protect civilians.

How that will manifest remains unclear.

Frank Lowenstein, who worked as Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations under US President Barack Obama during the 2014 Israel-Gaza war, told CNN that whether Israel heeds the US’ advice “will be a very strong indication of how much influence we actually have over the Israeli(s).”If Israel takes the same military approach in the south as it did in the north, “it could lead to increasingly open disagreement with the Biden administration,” he said. “Given that the Israelis probably want to avoid a big public rift, there’s a reasonable likelihood they will take at least some steps to moderate their approach in the next phase.”Biden administration officials have been discussing with their Israeli counterparts how to protect civilians who fled to southern Gaza, should the IDF target the area again, US officials told CNN earlier.

The options being considered include moving civilians who went south back up north once military operations there end, one senior US official told CNN. Israel has so far warned displaced Palestinians against returning north, saying the area remains unsafe.

It is unclear how hundreds of thousands of displaced residents can return to the north, where up to half of homes have been destroyed, satellite analysis shows.On Friday, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) dropped leaflets in Khan Younis, the biggest city in southern Gaza, calling it a “fighting zone” and telling residents to “evacuate immediately.Khan Younis, Rafah and the Middle governorates in the south are sheltering nearly 920,000 internally displaced people, says the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which estimates that some 1.8 million people – over 80% of Gaza’s population – have been displaced across the Strip since October 7.

Gershon Baskin, a former Israeli hostage negotiator who once acted as a channel to Hamas, said it would be difficult for Gazans to return to their homes in the north, as most of those neighborhoods are “not livable anymore.” He doesn’t however see the war ending without the Israeli military moving south, especially to Khan Younis and Rafah.

Urban warfare

If the fighting moves to the south, it will “definitely be different,” said Riad Kahwaji, founder and CEO of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, a strategy and security consultancy in Dubai.

That part of Gaza, Kahwaji told CNN, is densely populated. “This area was designated a safe area, and Israel had nearly a million of the Palestinians living up in the north relocate to the south under the pretext that the military operations are in the north, even though there was still bombardment in the south,” Lowenstein, the former US envoy, suggested that the immediate focus would likely be on “providing safe zones and passage in the south,” adding that it is nonetheless “far from clear how feasible that is,” as hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians are living “in a very small area.”

“And the already catastrophic humanitarian conditions will likely get even more dire as the weather gets worse and the health situation deteriorates further,Kahwaji said one element likely to be a factor in Israel’s military calculations is the cost-benefit analysis of each tactic: ground operations versus air offensives.

Israel has primarily relied on airstrikes and targeted bombardment in its war on Hamas, which has spared it major troop casualties, he said. If it decides on a primarily ground-based offensive in the south to lessen civilian losses, it will prove challenging for its soldiers, he added.

“Urban warfare is the toughest warfare,” Kahwaji said. “It is regarded as the hell for any soldier on an offensive operation.”

Amidror, the former Netanyahu adviser, said that while Israel does what it can to minimize civilian losses, it cannot halt its military operation because Hamas uses civilians as “human shields.”

“Let us assume that there is no technical way to fight and destroy Hamas without harming civilians,” Amidror said. “What is your advice? To give immunity to Hamas because they are very successful in attempts to use civilians as human shields?”

“From our (Israel’s) point of view, Hamas doesn’t have any immunity, and we will destroy Hamas,” he said. “And if civilians in Gaza are paying a price for that, we are very sorry, but the question should be applied to Hamas.”The Israeli military has told all civilians in Gaza City to evacuate “southwards” as it maintains its bombardment of the coastal enclave in response to last weekend’s Hamas attacks that killed more than 1,400 people.constant airstrikes – a task that the United Nations says is dangerous and unfeasible.

Israeli war planes have been pounding Gaza for a week, leveling entire neighborhoods, including schools and mosques. Israel says it strikes Hamas targets and that the group has used civilians as human shields.

Israel’s assault has killed at least 2,670 people in Gaza, and injured more than 9,600 others. Nearly 1 million Palestinians in Gaza have been forced from their homes,What happened?

Militants from Gaza fired thousands of rockets towards Israeli towns on October 7, before breaking through the heavily fortified border fence with Israel and sending militants deep into Israeli territory. There, Hamas gunmen killed more than 1,400 people, including civilians and soldiers, and took up to 150 hostages, according to Israeli authorities.The attacks were unprecedented in tactics and scale as Israel has not faced its adversaries in street battles on its own territory since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. It has also never faced a terror attack of this magnitude that has taken the lives of so many civilians. While Hamas has kidnapped Israelis before, it has never before taken dozens of hostages at once, including children and the elderly.

A senior Hamas official in Lebanon told a Russian state-backed channel that the group had been preparing for the attack for two years.

Hamas called the operation “Al-Aqsa Storm” and said that it was a response to what it described as Israeli attacks on women, the desecration of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and the ongoing siege of Gaza.They said the bodies of some 1,500 Hamas fighters had been recovered inside Israel since Saturday’s assault.How has Israel responded?

In response to the attack, Israel has declared war and launched “Operation Swords of Iron,” striking what it says are Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza. It has also blocked supply lines of basic necessities to the Gaza population, including fuel and waterBetween October 7 and 12, Israel dropped 6,000 bombs on the densely inhabited territory – that’s equivalent to the total number of airstrikes on Gaza during the entire 2014 Gaza-Israel conflict, which lasted 50 days.

Children make up “between 30% and 40% of the wounded” in Israel’s airstrikes on Gaza, British-Palestinian surgeon Ghassan Abu-Sittah told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour on Thursday.

The IDF has told civilians in Gaza to leave their residential areas immediately for their safety, but some say there is nowhere safe to go. All crossings out of Gaza have been shut.

Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant said on Monday that he had ordered a “complete siege” on Gaza, blocking delivery of electricity, food, fuel and water. Energy Minister Israel Katz has said supplies will remain cut off until hostages being held by Hamas are freed.Israel on Wednesday formed an emergency government and war management cabinet.

On Friday, Israel’s military told the 1.1 million people in northern Gaza to evacuate their homes immediately.

CNN has geolocated and authenticated five videos from the scene of a large explosion along one of the evacuation routes for civilians south of Gaza City.

The videos show many dead bodies amid a scene of extensive destruction. Some of those bodies are on a flat-bed trailer that appears to have been used to carry people away from Gaza City. They include several children. There are also a number of badly burned and damaged cars.

It’s unclear what caused the widespread devastation; the explosion occurred on Salah al-Deen Street on Friday afternoon.

IDF spokesman Lt. Col. Peter Lerner told CNN in an interview on Sunday that the Israeli military did not strike the convoy on Salah Al-Deen street.What’s the situation in Gaza now?

A humanitarian crisis in Gaza is rapidly spiraling amid warnings that peosple are at risk of starvation as Israel tightens its chokehold on the territory.

The Gaza Strip is one of most densely populated places on earth, with some 2 million people crammed in 140-square-mile territory. The enclave lies on Egypt’s western border and has been under blockade since Hamas seized control in 2007.

The Israeli air, naval and land blockade on the territory, as well as the Egyptian land blockade, continue today.

The enclave’s only power station stopped working on Wednesday. Hospitals are expected to run out of fuel, leading to “catastrophic” conditions, the Palestinian Health Ministry warned. The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that hospitals are at “breaking point.”

On Thursday, the International Committee of the Red Cross warned hospitals in Gaza “risk turning into morgues” as they lose power. Airstrikes have hit at least 88 education facilities and killed 12 UN personnel, according to the UN.

The Palestine Red Crescent has warned of a “humanitarian catastrophe” as there are “no safe areas” to evacuate civilians to, after Israel told half the population to migrate south. It described the Israeli evacuation call as “shocking and beyond belief.”

Human rights groups have meanwhile warned of possible war crimes being committed by Israel in Gaza. Amnesty International on Friday urged Israel to “immediately” lift its blockade on the enclave, saying the “collective punishment” of civilians for Hamas’ terrorist atrocities amounts to a war crime.

Since Israel shut its two crossings with Gaza, the only corridor through which Palestinians or aid can pass in and out of the territory is the Rafah Crossing, which connects the south of the enclave to Egypt. But it’s unclear whether that crossing is open.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said on Saturday that the crossing is open but aerial bombardment has rendered the roads on the Gaza side “inoperable.”

Aid flights from Jordan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the World Health Organization, and the Red Cross have arrived in Egypt, but the supplies have not yet made it through the crossing. Shoukry said Egypt has tried to ship humanitarian aid to Gaza but has not received the proper authorization to do so.Hamas said on Friday that 13 Israeli hostages held in Gaza have been killed by “random” Israeli bombings on the enclave over the past 24 hours. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it could not confirm or deny the claim.

Hamas also called on Gazans not to leave their homes, accusing Israel of engaging in “psychological warfare” by sending messages telling Palestinian civilians and employees of international organizations to evacuate to the south. “Displacement and exile are not for us,” Hamas said.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) on Friday said it had relocated its central operations center and international staff in Gaza to the south of the besieged enclave.

What is Hamas?

Hamas is an Islamist organization with a military wing that came into being in 1987, emerging out of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist group that was founded in the late 1920s in Egypt.

The group, like most Palestinian factions and political parties, insists that Israel is an occupying power and that it is trying to liberate the Palestinian territories. It considers Israel an illegitimate state and has called for its downfall.

Unlike some other Palestinian factions, Hamas refuses to engage with Israel. In 1993, it opposed the Oslo Accords, a peace pact between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that saw the PLO give up armed resistance against Israel in return for promises of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. The Accords also established the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.Hamas presents itself as an alternative to the PA, which has recognized Israel and has engaged in multiple failed peace initiatives with it. The PA, whose credibility among Palestinians has suffered over the years, is today led by President Mahmoud Abbas.

It has over the years claimed many attacks on Israel and has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union and Israel. Israel accuses its archenemy Iran of backing the group.

Hamas rules Gaza, the small strip of land bordering Israel and Egypt that has changed hands several times over the past 70 years. The vast majority of its population are descendants of refugees who were either expelled or forced to flee their homes in 1948 in what is now Israel.How did the two sides get here?

Tensions between Israelis and the Palestinians have existed since before Israel’s founding in 1948. Thousands of people on both sides have been killed and many more injured over decades.

Violence has been particularly acute this year. The number of Palestinians – militants and civilians – killed in the occupied West Bank by Israeli forces since the year began is the highest in nearly two decades. The same is true of Israelis and foreigners – most of them civilians – killed in Palestinian attacks.

Israel captured Gaza from Egypt in the 1967 war, then withdrew its troops and settlers in 2005. The territory, home to some 2 million Palestinians, fell under Hamas’ control in 2007 after a brief civil war with Fatah, a rival Palestinian faction that is the backbone of the Palestinian Authority.

After Hamas seized control, Israel and Egypt imposed a strict siege on the territory, which is ongoing. Israel also maintains an air and naval blockade on Gaza.

Human Rights Watch has called the territory an “open-air prison.” More than half of its population lives in poverty and is food insecure, and nearly 80% of its population relies on humanitarian assistance.Hamas and Israel have fought several wars. Before Saturday’s operation, the last war between the two was in 2021, which lasted for 11 days and killed at least 250 people in Gaza and 13 in Israel.

Saturday’s assault occurred 50 years almost to the day since the 1973 war, when Israel’s Arab neighbors launched a surprise attack on Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, on October 6, 1973.

What happens next?

Israel is now on a war footing and has amassed more than 300,000 reservists along the Gaza border for a potential ground operation. It has said that it will exact a heavy price on Hamas for its attack and plans to retrieve Israeli hostages from the territory.

Israel has dealt with hostage situations before, but never at this scale. In the past, militants have mostly demanded the release of prisoners held in Israeli jails in exchange for captured Israelis. In 2011, Israel traded 1,027 Palestinians for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, and in 2004, it released more than two dozen Lebanese and Arab prisoners – including two senior Hezbollah officials – for Elhanan Tannenbaum, an Israeli businessman and army reserve colonel, as well as the bodies of three IDF soldiers. In 2008, Israel released five Palestinian prisoners, five Lebanese prisoners and returned the bodies of nearly 200 Arab fighters in exchange for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers.

Hamas has captured at least 150 hostages. Their presence in Gaza will undoubtedly complicate any Israeli military operation there.

The militant group’s armed wing said Monday it would begin killing civilian hostages and broadcasting the act if Israel targets people in Gaza without warning. It isn’t clear if it has acted on those threats yet.The IDF has said that it plans to take control of the Gaza Strip. Its spokesperson, Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, said the aim is to “end the Gaza enclave” and “control the entire enclave.”Al Jazeera Arabic on Saturday that Hamas is ready “for all options, including a war and an escalation on all levels.”

“We are ready for the worst-case scenario, including a ground invasion, which will be the best for us to decide the ending of this battle,” al-Arouri said.

Could this lead to a wider regional conflict?

Hamas’ operation was carried out in a sophisticated and coordinated manner and would have taken a significant amount of planning. Speculation has been rife that the group may have received assistance from abroad, which, if proven, could raise the specter of a wider regional war.Israel says Iran supports Hamas to the tune of some $100 million dollars a year. The US State Department in 2021 said that the group receives funding, weapons, and training from Iran, as well as some funds that are raised in Gulf Arab countries.

“Of course Iran is in the picture,” one US official told CNN. “They’ve provided support for years to Hamas and Hezbollah.”A senior Biden administration official said on Saturday that it was too early to say whether Iran was directly involved in the attack, but that Washington will be tracking the matter “very closely.”

But President Joe Biden on Wednesday issued a stark warning to Iran to “be careful” around its actions in the regionIranian President Ebrahim Raisi spoke to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh by phone last Sunday and later congratulated the Palestinian people for their “victory” over Israel. On Monday, however, Iran’s mission to the United Nations said the Islamic Republic was “not involved in Palestine’s response,” referring to the Hamas attack. “It is taken solely by Palestine itself,” it said.

On Friday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said in Beirut that “Lebanon’s security is Iran’s security,” in an apparent warning to Israel not to strike Lebanon or the Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group that operates there.

He said that Western officials had asked him if new fronts could open against Israel, adding that it’s “probable” that members of the “resistance” against Israel could enter the war “with the continuation of Israeli war crimes.”

The warning came a day after the Iran-allied Syrian regime said that Israel struck Damascus and Aleppo airports, rendering them non-operational.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has meanwhile been shuttling around the region, visiting Israel, the occupied West Bank and Jordan. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also arrived in Israel on Friday.

The US has ordered two carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean Sea, Austin said on Saturday. A US official told CNN that the US is also sending more fighter jets to the Middle East to deter any Iranian potential aggression or an expansion of the fighting beyond Israel’s borders.Israel may also face the threat of new fronts opening in the war. Of its immediate neighbors, it is only at peace with Jordan and Egypt, and is officially in a state of war with Lebanon and Syria. Israel has said it is ready in case there are attacks from those two countries.

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, has praised Hamas’ attack and said it is in contact with Palestinian militant groups “at home and abroad,” its Al Manar channel said. The group claimed responsibility for targeting three Israeli sites in an area known as Shebaa Farms using missiles and artillery. The area is considered by Lebanon as Israeli-occupied. Israel responded by firing artillery.Monday, the IDF said it killed a “number of armed suspects” who infiltrated into Israel from Lebanon and that soldiers were searching the area. Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati said on Monday that his country doesn’t want to be drawn into the conflict.

The IDF said Wednesday a report was received regarding a suspected “infiltration from Lebanon into Israeli air space.”

It did not provide further details and it was unclear whether the infiltration involved aircraft, drones, gliders, balloons or people

Hamas is attacking both Israeli civilian and military targets, and it has also taken hostage an unknown number of Israeli soldiers and citizens, presumably to exchange them at some point for Hamas prisoners held in Israeli jails. In the past, Israel has exchanged large numbers of Palestinian prisoners for Israelis held by Hamas.

The Israeli hostages seized by Hamas will also complicate any Israeli military response in Gaza since the hostages will likely be dispersed in such a way as to dissuade Israel from air strikes in Gaza that might put the hostages in harm’s way.

But there appears also to be a larger play going on here: an attempt to end the rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states that began in earnest during the Trump Administration with the Abraham Accords.Led by President Donald Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, the “Abraham Accords” resulted in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signing deals recognizing the state of Israel for the first time. Morocco and Sudan also normalized ties with IsraelThose accords were a striking breakthrough because historically, Arab nations cited the treatment of Palestinians by Israel for their refusal to recognize the Jewish state. Fearing their cause would be ignored, Palestinians opposed the agreements.

Opinion: Did Hamas attacks have a hidden target?

Opinion by Peter Bergen, CNN

 4 minute read

Updated 8:28 PM EDT, Sat October 7, 2023

Video appears to show Hamas taking woman hostage near Gaza

01:06 - Source: CNN

Editor’s Note: Peter Bergen is CNN’s national security analyst, a vice president at New America, a professor of practice at Arizona State University, and the host of the Audible podcast “In the Room With Peter Bergen,” also on Apple and Spotify.  The opinions expressed in this commentary are his own. View more opinion at CNN.

CNN

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The surprise weekend attack by Hamas, involving thousands of missiles fired from Gaza and on-the-ground fighting inside Israel, has the potential to upend an emerging diplomatic deal that could reshape the region.

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Rockets are fired from Gaza City as Israel's Iron Dome air defence system attempts to intercept them on October 7, 2023.

US officials raise concerns over Israeli intelligence after Hamas attacks

Those accords were a striking breakthrough because historically, Arab nations cited the treatment of Palestinians by Israel for their refusal to recognize the Jewish state. Fearing their cause would be ignored, Palestinians opposed the agreements.

Indeed the Abraham Accords did not do much of anything for the Palestinians. Kushner said he would help to find $50 billion for Palestinian projects, but that didn’t happen because the Palestinians boycotted an investment conference he hosted in Bahrain in 2019.

The Trump administration also moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which previous US administrations had not done, deeming it provocative to the Palestinians who claim parts of East Jerusalem.

The Biden administration has largely continued the Trump administration’s approach; the US embassy remains in Jerusalem, and the Biden team is seeking to broker a deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel, which, if it happened, would help to reshape the Middle East even more than the Abraham Accords did.This deal seems to have been moving forward already in small but significant ways; Israeli planes now have overflight rights over the Saudi kingdom, an Israeli cabinet minister visited the kingdom last month, the first time this has ever happened, and an Israel official conducted a Jewish prayer service in Saudi Arabia last week, again a first.An Israeli normalization deal with Saudi Arabia — the location of the two holiest sites in Islam— would be hugely symbolic and have real security benefits for Israel. After all, almost exactly half a century ago, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, two Arab states, Egypt and Syria, attacked Israel. Also, both Israel and Saudi Arabia have a strong common interest today, both seeing Iran as their most dangerous enemy.

The details of the Israeli-Saudi deal are still being hammered out, but the Palestinians, who were left out in the cold by the Abraham Accords, may have  reason to worry that their interests will not be given their due consideration in any future Israeli-Saudi deal.Israel’s government today is the most right-wing in its history and the least sympathetic to the Palestinians’ political aims. At the same time, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman known as MBS, is reported to be far less concerned about the Palestinian cause than his father, King Salman, who remains the titular head of the Saudi kingdom but is widely reported to be in ill health. MBS is the de facto ruler.

In a rare interview two weeks ago, MBS told Fox News, “Every day we get closer” to normalizing ties with Israel.All of that may help explain why Hamas militants launched their surprise attack on Israel now. With the fighting inside Israel and the Israeli strikes in Gaza, a US-brokered Saudi-Israeli deal could be scuttled for the foreseeable futureA beneficiary of such a development would be Iran which has long had a contentious relationship with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Iran has also provided support to Hamas, according to the US State Department, in a 2020 report on terrorism.

Top Iranian officials have recently publicly warned against any rapprochement with Israel. Last week the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said, “Countries that make the gamble of normalization with Israel will lose. They are betting on a losing horse.”

And on Saturday, Khamenei’s top military adviser said that Iran supported Hamas attacks in Israel “until the liberation of Palestine and Jerusalem.”Hamas claims to be holding “over 100” Israeli hostages, including high-ranking officers, and continued to fire rockets into Israel throughout Sunday. Another Palestinian armed group, called Islamic Jihad, said on Sunday it is holding at least 30 hostages in Gaza.Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed retaliation, warning his country would take “mighty vengeance” and was readying for “a long and difficult war.”

He urged Palestinians living in Gaza to “leave now.”

Over 400 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza as Israel responds with airstrikes in the densely-inhabited enclave.Throughout the bloody weekend, Hamas launched thousands of rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel – making direct hits on multiple locations inside the country including Tel Aviv – while armed terror groups entered Israel and infiltrated military bases, towns and farms, shooting at civilians and taking hostages.Photos released by the Israeli foreign ministry showed dozens of bodies in the aftermath of a Hamas attack on a music festival near the Israel-Gaza border, which emergency responders said left at least 260 dead.

As Israeli forces clashed on the ground with Hamas fighters, Israeli airstrikes blasted what it said were Hamas-associated locations.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it had struck over 400 targets in the small enclave, including 10 towers that it said were used by Hamas and “a number of terrorist squads in the area surrounding the Gaza Strip.”

Palestinian authorities say 78 children are among the dead, and 2,300 others wounded.According to Netanyahu, Israel’s “first phase” of retaliation has ended with the “destruction of the majority of the enemy forces that penetrated our territory.” It will be followed by an “offensive formationHis government has decided to stop the supply of electricity, fuel and goods to GazaHamas has warned against measures in Gaza, alluding to hostages held in the areaIn a recorded audio message Saturday, Abu Obaida spokesman for the Al Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, said: “What happens to the people of the Gaza Strip will happen to them and beware of miscalculation.”

Civilians taken hostage include “not only soldiers but civilians, children, grandmothers,” Israeli Defense Forces spokesman Lt. Col. Richard Hecht told a briefing on Sunday. “We have lost soldiers, we have lost commanders, we have lost a lot of civilians.”

It has been more than 17 years since an Israeli soldier was taken as a prisoner of war in an assault on Israeli territory. And Israel has not seen this kind of infiltration of military bases, towns and kibbutzim since town-by-town fighting in the 1948 war of independence.On Sunday, Hecht, the IDF spokesman, said Israeli forces had neutralized most of the significant battles that took place in the settlement of Otef, but there are still ongoing operations in numerous other parts of the country.The IDF’s goal for the next 12 hours is to “end the Gaza enclave … and kill all the terrorists in our territory,” he said.

The IDF is evacuating more than 20 communities adjacent to the Gaza security fence, and searching the area for any Hamas militants left. It is also seeking to control breaches in the fence.

Asked by a journalist about the intelligence failure that had allowed such a large scale attack to occur, Hecht said: “This is not a question for now … I am sure that will be a big discussion down the road.”

‘No warning of any kind’

The highly coordinated assault, which began Saturday morning, was unprecedented in its scale and scope and came on the 50th anniversary of the 1973 War in which Arab states blitzed Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

“We had no warning of any kind, and it was a total surprise that the war broke out this morning,” Efraim Halevy, the former head of Mossad, Israel’s Intelligence Service, told CNN.

The number of rockets fired by Palestinian militants was at a scale “never seen before,” Halevy said, and this was “the first time” that Gaza has been able to “penetrate deep into Israel and to take control of villages.It is rare for Palestinian militants to be able to make it into Israel from Gaza which is sealed off and heavily watched by Israel’s military. Gaza is one of the most densely packed places in the world, an isolated coastal enclave of almost 2 million people crammed into 140 square miles.

Governed by Hamas, the territory is largely cut off from the rest of the world by an Israeli blockade of Gaza’s land, air and sea dating back to 2007. Egypt controls Gaza’s southern border crossing, Rafah. Israel has placed heavy restrictions on the freedom of civilian movement and controls the importation of basic goods into the narrow coastal strip.

Fighting between the two sides has surged in the last two years. The violence has been driven by frequent Israeli military raids in Palestinian towns and cities, which Israel has said are a necessary response to a rising number of attacks by Palestinian militants on Israelis.

They also come at a moment of deep division in Israel, months after the country’s right-wing government pushed through a contentious plan to reduce the power of the country’s courts, sparking a social, political and military crisis.

Western states condemned the Hamas attack on Saturday and pledged support for Israel while Arab states, including those that have recognized Israel, called for calm.

United States President Joe Biden spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday and said that Washington “unequivocally condemns this appalling assault against Israel by Hamas terrorists from Gaza.”

Saudi Arabia, which is holding talks with the US to potentially normalize relations with Israel, said it is following closely the “unprecedented” situation and called on “both sides to immediately stop the escalation,Pleas for release of hostages

Israelis are sharing photos of friends and family who they say have been kidnapped by Hamas militants, many of them women and children.

One Israeli mother told CNN she had been on the phone with her children, aged 16 and 12, who were home alone when they heard gunshots outside and people trying to enter.

“They were scared to death. I can’t even imagine what they felt. And I wasn’t there to help,” said the mother, who was away from the home at the time. CNN is not identifying the mother and her children for safety reasons.

Then, over the phone, she heard the door break down.

“I heard terrorists speaking in Arabic to my teenagers. And the youngest saying to them ‘I’m too young to go,’” the mother said. “And the phone went off, the line went off. That was the last time I heard from them.”

Another Israeli resident Yoni Asher told CNN his wife, who was visiting near the Gaza border with their young daughters, was among those abducted. On Saturday he tracked her phone and saw it was located in Gaza; later that day he said he recognized her in a viral clip of people loaded into the back of a truck flanked by Hamas militants.

Several people were taken hostage during an attack by Hamas militants on an Israeli music festival near the Israel-Gaza border. One video on social media showed an Israeli woman being kidnapped, hoisted onto the back of a motorcycle and driven away as her boyfriend was apprehended. Another clip pictured a German-Israeli woman who was taken from the festival being paraded around Gaza, unconscious and motionless.An Israel Police spokesperson has told CNN that family members who wish to report their loved ones as missing to come to the nearest police station when it’s safe to leave their homes. The police suggested relatives bring photos and personal items from which DNA samples can be extracted to help with identification

Hours before Israel said it had resumed combat operations against Hamas, the United States pressured its ally to shield Palestinian civilians in one of the most significant diplomatic moves yet in the more than 50-day conflictThe question now, if a seven-day truce is permanently broken, is whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government is prepared to listen.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken laid out American requirements in private talks in Jerusalem with Netanyahu and his war cabinet. More significantly, Blinken made the Biden administration approach clear in unmistakable language in public.

“I underscored the imperative of the United States that the massive loss of civilian life and displacement of the scale that we saw in Northern Gaza not be repeated in the South,” Blinken said in a televised press conference in Tel Aviv. His comments came hours before the lapsing of a seven-day pause in the fighting, which had seen more than 100 hostages released by Hamas.I made clear that before Israel resumes major military operations, it must put in place humanitarian civilian protection plans that minimize further casualties of innocent Palestinians,” Blinken said, specifically mentioning the need to safeguard hospitals, powers stations and facilities. He said that Netanyahu had agreed to take steps to protect civilians. But two key questions now will be whether those efforts are genuine and effective and to what extent the Israeli prime minister and his military brass are willing to accommodate US concerns.

The Israel Defense Forces said early Friday that it has resumed operations against Hamas, accusing the group of violating the agreement and firing toward Israel.

Blinken’s talks with top Israeli officials came on a day when there were growing indications that the pause in fighting was increasingly fragile.

His frank tone contrasted with public comments that were more advisory in tone from the Biden administration in the initial stage of the war. Heart-rending scenes of death and mayhem in Gaza opened up the White House to intense domestic criticism from grassroots, young and progressive voters less than a year before the 2024 election.US officials have been making clear in recent days in private and in anonymous quotes to journalists that they wanted to see Israel take more care when fighting resumes to protect Gazans – even while acknowledging that Hamas embeds its forces in high population centers and in civilian infrastructure. Blinken’s decision to do so publicly reflects an elevated attempt to use US influence following a period in which the administration helped orchestrate the pause to allow many of the hostages to leave Gaza alive.

It also suggests that the White House is not completely buying Israel’s assurances that it takes every possible step to alleviate civilian casualties in its response to the October 7 Hamas terror attack that killed 1,200 people. Blinken noted bluntly, for instance, that he told Netanyahu: “Intent matters. But so does the result.”The Biden administration makes a significant move

Blinken specifically said that Washington wants Israel to permit civilians who fled to southern Gaza in the first wave of fighting to head back north before Israel resumes operations. And he called for the provision of safe areas in the heavily populated south to allow Palestinians to escape Israeli bombardments. Those details were first reported by CNN’s MJ Lee, Jennifer Hansler and Katie Bo Lillis on Wednesday.Aaron David Miller, a US Middle East peace negotiator for multiple presidents, noted a significant shift in the administration’s rhetoric.

“The public messaging on the part of the administration from the president on down is if the Israelis are going to continue this campaign, certainly, for any significant duration, they are going to have to deal with two realities,” Miller told CNN International on Thursday.

“Number one, you are going to have to not attack locations where there are densely populated civilians. And number two, you are going to have to allow the continued surging of humanitarian assistance for the roughly half to two-thirds of Gazans who have now been displaced from their homes, many of whom are in the location where the Israelis intend to operate.”

The administration’s tougher tone with Israel is not without risk. While he may be able to alleviate some of the domestic political pressure from his left, President Joe Biden will attract criticism from Republicans who will accuse him of curtailing Israel’s right to defend itself following a horrific terror attack. The strong US focus on curbing civilian casualties could also be exploited by Hamas in its ongoing efforts to use civilian infrastructure as cover for its military operations.If the Israelis do not heed Blinken’s warnings, the Biden administration will look weak. And if there are again episodes in which hospitals come under siege from Israeli forces or residential areas are bombed and large numbers of innocent Palestinians die, the president’s critics are unlikely to remember the nuances of Blinken’s remarks in Israel.Netanyahu’s dilemma

Increasing US pressure adds another dimension to the political, military and moral dilemma that Israel is facing as it deliberates its next move. Netanyahu had been under increasing heat from families of those still believed to be held hostage in Gaza, including young men and soldiers, to hold off on launching a new offensive until all those captive are freed. That’s a calculation that would keep the initiative in the conflict in the hands of Hamas and could take many days or weeks. The price that Hamas would demand for the return of Israeli soldiers is likely to be far beyond the current ratio of three Palestinians freed from Israeli jails for one Israeli civilian released, and it may be one the government would find it impossible to pay.The Israeli leader is also weakened because the Hamas attacks, one of the darkest days in Israel’s history, happened on his watch. A New York Times report published Thursday is likely to heighten his vulnerability. The paper cited emails, documents and interviews in revealing that the plans for the Hamas assault were known for more than a year before October 7, but Israeli military and intelligence officials considered they would be impossible for the terror group to pull off. The report said it was unclear whether Netanyahu and other top leaders saw the plan.etanyahu told Israelis on Thursday that he swore to eliminate Hamas and nothing would stop him. Given the militant group’s maze of tunnels below Gaza and its embedding in civilian areas, it is not clear if Israel will consider that its operational needs are reconcilable with what Blinken called US “imperatives.”

But for Israel’s standing internationally, US support of the Jewish state will be even more important in a second wave of fighting in Gaza than it was in the initial outbreak of the war. The country is likely to find itself isolated if it is blamed for reigniting the war.

At home, however, Netanyahu is under great political duress from the hard-right members of his coalition, which is critical to his fragile hold on power. Israel also believes that it is fighting an existential threat to its survival and that of the Jewish people. While many foreign powers do not necessarily accept that interpretation of the war against Hamas, this is a mindset that could convince Israel that any action is justified.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett told “CNN News Central” on Thursday that “we are going to have to do what we need to do and we’re doing it as best as we can to minimize casualties. But there’s no magic wand and if anyone has a magic wand, let us know and we’ll use it.”

Senior Netanyahu adviser Mark Regev told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer that the Israeli cabinet had presented maps to Blinken showing what he said were humanitarian safe zones in the southern part of the Gaza Strip to which civilians could flee. He also said that Israel would allow aid to continue to flow to Gazan civilians.

“As we pursue Hamas, and we will pursue Hamas relentlessly,” he said, adding, “At the same time as we pursue our campaign against Hamas, we’ll do all that we can to safeguard Gaza’s civilian population, to keep it out of the crossfire between the IDF and the terrorists, and at the same time, in parallel, of course work (so) that aid enters the Gaza Strip, food, water, medicine and other things for the people of Gaza to limit the level of suffering.”

But the reality is that high intensity warfare in an area as densely populated as Gaza will almost always have disastrous results.

Washington will be watching closely how Israel conducts itself since, in the past, its standards for protecting civilians have fallen short of what much of the rest of the world would accept.

Millions of Israelis were jolted awake on Saturday by the sounds of explosions and blaring emergency sirens. The Palestinian group Hamas had launched an unprecedented assault on the country hours after the 50th anniversary of what Israelis call the Yom Kippur War and Arab countries call the October 6 War.promptly became clear that the highly organized attack by land, air and sea would turn into a terrorist rampage. Iran-backed Hamas, which has ruled the Gaza strip since 2006, tightening its grip in 2007 when it expelled its Palestinian rivals Fatah in brief internal war, launched thousands of rockets as its operatives infiltrated Israeli territory using motorcycles, trucks, paragliders, and speedboatsInside Israel, they went after soldiers and civilians, even posting videos on social media, as the world saw evidence of how they targeted, hunted down, and brutalized Israelis of all ages. Many were kidnapped and taken to Gaza and dragged through the streets.

There’s much that Israel has done wrong. But nothing justifies what Hamas has just perpetrated. As many knowledgeable people have pointed out, what Hamas has done is clearly an act of terrorism, no matter what your definition.

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On Saturday, Israelis huddled in fear as news spread that heavily armed Hamas gunmen were roaming the south of the country, indiscriminately killing men and women and kidnapping adults and children, taking many of them to Gaza.CNN and others authenticated many of the videos. In one, geolocated by CNN to a Gaza neighborhood, gunmen open the trunk of a car and pull out a terrified woman — barefoot, with her wrists cable-tied behind her back — and move her into the backseat.

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Opinion by Frida Ghitis

 6 minute read

Updated 8:00 AM EDT, Sun October 8, 2023

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01:03 - Source: CNN

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In the border town of Sderot, a frequent target of Hamas rockets over the years, an Associated Press photographer captured the bodies of at least six people, who were  killed while standing under one of the reinforced bus shelters.

By Saturday evening, with rockets injuring civilians as far north as Tel Aviv, Israeli media reported at least 300 dead and more than 1,400 wounded, with an unknown number taken hostage and prisoners of war. It’s one of the deadliest days in Israel’s history, and a security failure reminiscent of both 9/11 and Israel’s 1973 calamityAs Israel sought to stop Hamas’ attacks, and launched retaliatory air strikes on targets in Gaza, the casualties started to mount among Palestinians, as well. At least 232 Palestinians have been killed and a further 1,697 have been wounded, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Israeli airstrikes also targeted Hamas offices in Gaza City. After warning it was going to fire, as it usually does, Israel flattened a 14-story building. As always, Palestinian civilians will pay a steep and tragic price.

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Hamas leaders say they’re “ready for the worst-case scenario,” fully aware of what they deliberately unleashed.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated the obvious when he told Israelis the country was at war. When this ends, Netanyahu and top Israeli security officials will have to reckon with the stunning failure of intelligence and basic defensive preparations.

This disaster is occurring at a time of deep political fractures in Israel. The time will come for recriminations and the political consequences for this failure will be severe. But the priority is elsewhere now. Benny Gantz, a retired general and one of the opposition leaders, declared, in what he said was a message to Iran, “The entire people of Israel are united…There is no coalition and opposition now.”

For now, Israel is dealing with the immediate threat. And soon, Israel will undoubtedly face withering condemnation, as it always does.So far, Israel has received solid support from many quarters. President Joe Biden spoke to Netanyahu, offering US support and assistance. Israel, Biden said, has a right to defend itself, reiterating that America’s “support for Israel’s security is rock solid and unwavering.

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Opinion: Hamas’ attack on Israel is an indisputable act of terrorism

Opinion by Frida Ghitis

 6 minute read

Updated 8:00 AM EDT, Sun October 8, 2023

Footage captures destruction throughout the day in Israel and Gaza

01:03 - Source: CNN

Editor’s Note: Frida Ghitis, a former CNN producer and correspondent, is a world affairs columnist. She is a weekly opinion contributor to CNN, a contributing columnist to The Washington Post and a columnist for World Politics Review. The views expressed in this commentary are her own. View more opinion on CNN.

CNN

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Frida Ghitis

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Inside Israel, they went after soldiers and civilians, even posting videos on social media, as the world saw evidence of how they targeted, hunted down, and brutalized Israelis of all ages. Many were kidnapped and taken to Gaza and dragged through the streets.

There’s much that Israel has done wrong. But nothing justifies what Hamas has just perpetrated. As many knowledgeable people have pointed out, what Hamas has done is clearly an act of terrorism, no matter what your definition.

Few Israelis miss the irony that Gaza, the territory from which it withdrew in 2005, is the launchpad for such deadly attacks. Israel and Egypt, Gaza’s neighbors, have imposed a blockade of the territory. But there is no occupation of Gaza, which is now in the hands of Hamas, a terrorist group spun off from the Muslim Brotherhood, with a charter committing it to the destruction of Israel.

On Saturday, Israelis huddled in fear as news spread that heavily armed Hamas gunmen were roaming the south of the country, indiscriminately killing men and women and kidnapping adults and children, taking many of them to Gaza.

Rockets are fired toward Israel from the Gaza Strip, Saturday, Oct. 7, 2023. The rockets were fired as Hamas announced a new operation against Israel.

Opinion: The Hamas attacks could prevent a diplomatic breakthrough

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In the border town of Sderot, a frequent target of Hamas rockets over the years, an Associated Press photographer captured the bodies of at least six people, who were  killed while standing under one of the reinforced bus shelters.

By Saturday evening, with rockets injuring civilians as far north as Tel Aviv, Israeli media reported at least 300 dead and more than 1,400 wounded, with an unknown number taken hostage and prisoners of war. It’s one of the deadliest days in Israel’s history, and a security failure reminiscent of both 9/11 and Israel’s 1973 calamity.

TOPSHOT - Rockets are fired from Gaza City towards Israel on October 7, 2023. Dozens of rockets were fired from the blockaded Gaza Strip towards Israel on October 7, 2023, an AFP journalist in the Palestinian territory said, as sirens warning of incoming fire blared in Israel. (Photo by MAHMUD HAMS / AFP) (Photo by MAHMUD HAMS/AFP via Getty Images)

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The United Arab Emirates, the crown jewel of the Abraham Accords, called for “maximum restraint and an immediate ceasefire.”

Social media, of course, was full of anti-Israel activists, already gearing up for what comes next.

As sure as night follows day, Israel will retaliate, and millions around the world will blame Israel – and the Jews – ignoring what happened this bloody Saturday.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is extraordinarily complicated. But there’s no denying that what happened on Saturday was an act of terrorism, one that deserves clear, unequivocal condemnation

After the horrendous attacks against Israeli civilians on October 7, Israel is rightly pursuing a campaign to eliminate Hamas. In doing so, it is imperative that Israel not lose sight of long-term strategic national security objectives but instead seek to wipe out Hamas within a broader military and diplomatic strategy.For the long-term security of Israel, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/10/middleeast/hamas-attack-crisis-benjamin-netanyahu-intl/index.html) must recognize that the extremism that fueled Hamas is part of a broader constellation of issues that are interconnected and that must be addressed for there to be a lasting peace in the region.

Israel should avoid acting in isolation but rather develop a strategy that serves its larger regional and international objectives. These include securing the safe release of [more than 230 hostages](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-says-number-of-confirmed-hostages-held-by-hamas-rises-to-239/), protecting nearby alliances, building partnerships with additional nations (most notably [Saudi Arabia](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/08/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-palestinians-hamas.html)) and working cooperatively and collaboratively with the United States and other countries as it seeks to eradicate Hamas.

Netanyahu’s creation of [a war Cabinet](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-10-11-23/h_a0aa465b00b827bc9033f43c8df793d1) was widely celebrated as a prudent step from a military point of view, but this entity, by design laser-focused on a military objective, risks being blind to the regional security imperatives vital to Israel’s near and long-term survival. The Israeli people must demand that Netanyahu create a mechanism that ensures the government adequately weighs other regional cross currents.

Specifically, the Israeli government must seek ways to eliminate Hamas without undermining its relationships with its Arab neighbors. Over several decades, these efforts have created vital relationships between Israel and [Jordan](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/overview-of-israel-jordan-cooperation), [Egypt](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/overview-of-israel-egypt-cooperation), [Bahrain](https://apnews.com/article/israel-bahrain-eli-cohen-abraham-accords-netanyahu-2a7d15d7b1ad4a49449af01bbc2cf335), [Morocco](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/17/morocco-s-normalization-of-relations-with-israel-jeopardized-by-war_6180014_124.html), the [United Arab Emirates](https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/01/business/uae-israel-trade-deal-mime-intl/index.html), [Qatar](https://thehill.com/policy/international/4279885-their-word-is-good-qatar-plays-complex-role-between-u-s-israel-and-hamas/) and [Sudan](https://apnews.com/article/politics-sudan-government-united-states-israel-bc4d614bfe02df18b32ee1cf9e6718da)

And at least until October 7, significant diplomatic headway was being made toward a [normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/22/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-cnn-interview-intl/index.html). Indeed, it is likely that [a central aim of Hamas’ attack](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/07/opinions/hamas-attacks-israel-palestine-diplomacy-bergen/index.html) was to fuel an unrelenting Israeli response to undermine their Arab alliances, all of which contribute to regional stability and threaten the terrorist group’s legitimacy.

For this reason, Israel must do all it can to [minimize outrage on the Arab street](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/protests-palestinian-gaza-middle-east-int/index.html). While this might seem unfair, the fact is that Arab leaders cannot long ignore the protests from their outraged citizens and will be forced to take increasingly [hostile diplomatic positions](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/middleeast/arab-allies-snub-biden-gaza-mime-intl/index.html) with Israel.

As Dennis Ross, a former US envoy to the Middle East, noted last week in [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/27/opinion/hamas-war-gaza-israel.html), many regional leaders eager for a partner in Israel to help crush radical Islamism privately support Israel’s effort to eliminate Hamas. But these Arab leaders are facing increasing [domestic political pressure](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/10/28/hamass-attack-on-israel-has-changed-the-middle-east) to respond to reports of civilian casualties in Gaza, first through [words of condemnation](https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/defense-news/article-770668) and ultimately through action, such as pledging to part ways diplomatically with Israel.

Moreover, in eliminating Hamas, Israel must ask itself, to borrow [a phrase from former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/15/us/letter-killing-terrorists-creating-more.html), whether it is creating more terrorists than it is killing. If so, its near-term goals to eliminate Hamas will do nothing to advance its long-term security interests in preventing the next generation of terrorists determined to strike at Israel.

Israel must ensure that its pursuit of its objectives against Hamas are conducted with the utmost care to minimize civilian casualties. While it is true that Hamas uses [civilians as human shields](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/hamas_human_shields.pdf) to create a significant tactical complication for Israel’s mission, Hamas’ inhumanity does not form a basis upon which Israel can depart from its obligations [to minimize civilian casualties](https://thehill.com/policy/international/4282098-us-says-human-shields-do-not-lessen-responsibility-of-israel-to-protect-civilians/). To fail to do so is to risk undermining Israel’s security interests in the region, Western support and its legitimacy.

In [a lengthy statement](https://barackobama.medium.com/my-statement-on-israel-and-gaza-a6c397f09a30) posted on the online site Medium, former President Barack Obama was right to emphasize that *how* Israel prosecutes its war against Hamas matters. It matters not only for the reasons Obama stated — consistency with international law and efforts to avoid death and suffering of civilians — but also because failing to do so likely constitutes a red line of sorts (though not one that [President Joe Biden](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/30/us/politics/biden-israel.html) or other officials in the administration have publicly articulated) as to what the US government will be willing to stomach as the suffering of civilians mounts. And it likely represents a pragmatic line as well for broader international support.

Take, for example, the [Israel Defense Forces strike on Gaza’s Jabalya refugee cam](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-01-23/h_6ce6ab9789f3f336afd49cd3deb3c3a6)p on Tuesday. While the IDF said that it was targeting high-level Hamas leadership, which might make the strikes legal under international law, Israel must not ignore the realpolitik implications. [Bolivia, Chile and Colombia](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/01/bolivia-diplomatic-ties-israel/) have taken drastic diplomatic steps against Israel, and [Jordan recalled its ambassador](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordan-recalls-envoy-israel-over-gaza-bombardment-2023-11-01/#:~:text=AMMAN%2C%20Nov%201%20(Reuters),and%20caused%20a%20humanitarian%20catastrophe.) from Tel Aviv. Meanwhile, [Secretary of State Antony Blinken](https://www.voanews.com/a/blinken-to-head-for-israel-elsewhere-in-region/7335622.html) is again visiting Israel, no doubt to put private pressure on the Israeli government to avoid civilian casualties. The diplomatic impacts to Israel will only continue to mount if these types of strikes persist.

Indeed, taking extreme care to minimize Palestinian civilian causalities is not only unquestionably the right, moral and lawful thing for Israel to do, but is inextricably linked to its own national security interests in building and maintaining vital partnerships that it will need long into the future.

Israel must also take meaningful steps to provide immediate relief from the [humanitarian crisis unfolding](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-30-23/index.html) in Gaza. While it is true that [Egypt](https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/will-egypt-play-role-easing-gaza-war), which controls a border with Gaza, and other regional actors have a part to play, Israel must take a leading role, given its [blockade](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-war-gaza-hamas-94db5fa6029977f302cf2af57349badc) and [aerial campaigns](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/28/world/israeli-ground-forces-inside-gaza-saturday-intl/index.html), both to abide by its obligations under the laws of war and to minimize regional and international condemnation.

Moreover, Israel must sharpen its rhetoric with respect to the enemy it faces and the nature of its objectives. It must be relentlessly precise that its enemy is singularly Hamas, and it must avoid rhetoric that demonizes the Palestinian people or the broader Arab community.

It should make clear that Hamas not only poses an existential threat to Israel but also has long victimized the Palestinian people and deprived them of a chance at a better future. Doing so hopefully can shift the prevailing narrative from one where Israel and the Palestinians are in conflict to one in which Israel and the Palestinians (along with other nations in the region and around the globe) must defeat a common enemy in Hamas.

And Israel must broaden its statement of purpose. Currently focused only on eradicating Hamas and the safe return of the hostages, Israel should instead articulate comprehensive strategic objectives that seek to advance (or at least not undermine) other interests, including regional stability and normalized diplomatic relations with its neighbors.

Absent broader strategic goals and action to further them, Israel could easily fall into the trap set by Hamas and Iran — seeking to decimate Hamas but, in so doing, undermining the prospect for the return of the hostages, alienating regional partnerships, strengthening Iran’s influence and fomenting a new generation of Arab youths to sustain the cycle of violence between Israel and its neighbors.

Israel has every right to defend itself from the heinous attacks by Hamas. But it must not allow anger and a desire for retribution at all costs to undermine its long-term goals of regional stability, security and peace.

In a 2009 book, Gideon Rose [wrote](https://www.cfr.org/excerpt-how-wars-end) that Americans think of wars as “street fights on a grand scale, with the central strategic challenge being how to beat up the bad guys.” The military leaders focus on the fighting, paying little attention to the long-term consequences. “But at some point, every war enters what might be called its endgame, and then any political questions that may have been ignored come rushing back with a vengeance.”

In the book, titled “How Wars End,” Rose found that a failure to fully think through political issues marked the United States’ involvement in six conflicts, from World War I to the Iraq War.

Last week, as Israel continued its military response to the October 7 Hamas terror attack, its political goals — and potential endgame — remained a source of huge controversy. The US has backed Israel’s right to defend itself, but President Joe Biden, under pressure from some in his party, has called for a “pause” in the war for humanitarian reasons.

Air power and terrorism expert **Robert A. Pape** of the University of Chicago recalled that “Israel invaded Southern Lebanon with some 78,000 combat troops and almost 3,000 tanks and armored vehicles in June 1982.”

“The goal was to smash PLO terrorists, and Israel achieved significant near-term success. However, this military operation caused the creation of Hezbollah in July 1982, led to vast local support for Hezbollah and waves of suicide attacks and ultimately led to the withdrawal of Israel’s army from much of southern Lebanon in 1985 and the growth of Hezbollah ever since.” In the war against Hamas, he added, “Israel’s strategic vision has been to go in heavily militarily first and then figure out the political process later. But this is likely to integrate Hamas and the local population together more and more and to produce more terrorists than it kills. … There is an alternative: [now, not later, start the political process toward a pathway to a Palestinian state, and create a viable political alternative for Palestinians to Hamas.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/opinions/israel-flawed-strategy-defeating-hamas-pape/index.html)”

**DJ Rosenthal**, who served as director for counterterrorism at the US National Security Council during the Obama administration, wrote that “Israel must ensure that its pursuit of its objectives against Hamas is conducted with the utmost care to minimize civilian casualties. While it is true that Hamas uses civilians as human shields to create a significant tactical complication for Israel’s mission, Hamas’ inhumanity does not form a basis upon which Israel can depart from its obligations to minimize civilian casualties. [To fail to do so is to risk undermining Israel’s security interests in the region, Western support and its legitimacy](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/02/opinions/israel-hamas-us-biden-obama-iran-rosenthal/index.html).”“Take, for example, the Israel Defense Forces strike on Gaza’s Jabalya refugee camp on Tuesday. While the IDF said that it was targeting high-level Hamas leadership, which might make the strikes legal under international law, Israel must not ignore the realpolitik implications. Bolivia, Chile and Colombia have taken drastic diplomatic steps against Israel, and Jordan recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Antony Blinken is again visiting Israel, no doubt to put private pressure on the Israeli government to avoid civilian casualties. The diplomatic impacts to Israel will only continue to mount if these types of strikes persist.”

**Shai Davidai**, an assistant professor of management at Columbia Business School, explained why he was seen crying in a viral video taken on the university’s campus. “Following the horrific massacre in Israel by Hamas terrorists on October 7, I felt an intense, relentless grief. Grief for the thousands of civilians shot, murdered, mutilated, raped and beheaded. Grief for the intentional killing of babies, some burned beyond recognition. Grief for the confused children dragged at gun point by violent men into captivity in Gaza.”

“[Yet there was a deeper, darker grief](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/03/opinions/israel-cornell-jewish-threats-columbia-hamas-davidai/index.html). A grief that seeped from a wound I’d thought was healed. A grief that comes from the trauma hiding at the bottom of every Jewish person’s heart. A grief that comes from seeing, once again, Jewish people targeted in their homes and communities.”

In Gaza, **Nadia AbuShaban** attended a birthday party for her 12-year-old nephew Hashem. “With so little opportunity in Gaza, what will he grow up to become? [What effect will all this fear and violence have on his developing, young mind?](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/03/opinions/gaza-children-birthday-party-abushaban/index.html) When will the realities of life here set in? And, of course, will he even live to see his next birthday?”

The most important factor in determining the political outcome of Israel’s current war will not take place in Gaza — but will instead unfold in the West Bank.That’s because if Israel really wants to deliver a serious long-term blow to Hamas as a potent political movement among the Palestinian people, it’s going to be essential to seriously rethink its attitude towards the Islamist extremist group’s archrivals: the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) on the international stage.

Without strengthening these Palestinian groups, which still represent the mainstream of the national movement, Hamas and even more extreme groups will almost certainly continue to grow and thrive among the Palestinian people.

If Israel is now serious about decimating Hamas’s military and political power, that cannot be done only or even mainly by killing the group’s leaders and members and blowing up its equipment and infrastructure. New people can and will fill the void and insurgencies can successfully operate on a shoestring and under extremely onerous conditions.

Because the Palestinian people, their cause and their national movement are not going to disappear, the only way to really marginalize Hamas in the long run is to abandon thepolicy of simultaneously strengthening and weakening both Palestinian factions to keep them at odds with each other and therefore ineffective as a national movement.

**Hamas, the early years**

In one of the most reckless and self-defeating policies in its young history, Israel, from the outset, sought to bolster and use Hamas to split and thereby cripple the Palestinian national movement.

[Hamas was formed](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamas) by the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza during the firmament of the first Palestinian intifada (uprising) against Israeli occupation in 1987. Israeli occupation authorities immediately believed they had stumbled upon a [marvelous opportunity to divide Palestinians](https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123275572295011847) between secular nationalists and Islamists just as they began to rise up on the ground in the occupied territories.

Hamas was given [considerable leeway](https://theintercept.com/2018/02/19/hamas-israel-palestine-conflict/) to organize and form itself, with Israel turning a blind eye to the organization’s early efforts to structure and found itself — activities that would have been ruthlessly suppressed if pursued by either Fatah-dominated organizations or the local grassroots committees that led the first uprising in its initial months.

For a brief period during the [Oslo negotiations](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo#:~:text=On%20September%2013%2C%201993%2C%20Israeli,%2C%E2%80%9D%20at%20the%20White%20House.) and the initial implementation of the Israeli-Palestinian agreements that led to the formation of the small self-administered Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank and most of Gaza in the 1990s, this deeply misguided strategy of divide and rule was essentially set aside in favor of serious negotiations with the PLO and a significant degree of cooperation with the PA.

However, after the failure of the Camp David summit in 2000 and the subsequent outbreak of the far more violent [second intifada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Israel/The-second-intifada) in the fall of that year, the Israeli right resumed power. Under Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli right has dominated national politics for the vast majority of subsequent years, and it eagerly resumed a divide and rule approach.

This seemed to reach a successful crescendo in 2007, when a year of divided government among Palestinians — with a Fatah presidency under Mahmoud Abbas and a Hamas-dominated legislature — collapsed into open conflict and Hamas violently expelled Fatah and the PA from Gaza.

**Israel’s ‘divide and rule’ approach**

For Netanyahu and his colleagues, this split was ideal. Hamas’ unwavering commitment to armed struggle and violence allowed the Israeli right to [paint the entire Palestinian national movement as hopelessly extreme.](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-20/ty-article-opinion/.premium/a-brief-history-of-the-netanyahu-hamas-alliance/0000018b-47d9-d242-abef-57ff1be90000)

And the split between Gaza and the West Bank provided Israelis who wanted no part in any additional negotiations with the Palestinians which could result in a two-state solution with a perfect excuse not to sit down with the PLO, by claiming that they do not represent the entirety of the Palestinian people.

For almost 20 years, Israel’s policy was to keep Hamas in power in Gaza, albeit besieged and contained, and periodically and literally cut down to size through wars cynically described as “[mowing the grass](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/14/israel-gaza-history/),” while at the same time ensuring that the PA continued to control the self-administered enclaves in the West Bank, albeit with extreme institutional and political weakness.

Above all, the core goal appeared to be to ensure that the Palestinian division prevented any additional movement towards the creation of a Palestinian state or the development of any further restrictions on Israeli settlement activity and the now openly-declared [national policy](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/08/israel-palestine-west-bank-annexation-netanyahu-smotrich-far-right/) goal of eventual additional [major annexation](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-725514) in the West Bank.

In March 2019, Netanyahu told a private meeting of Likud party Knesset members that “whoever is against a Palestinian state should be for” transferring funds to Hamas in Gaza, [according to the Jerusalem Post.](https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/netanyahu-money-to-hamas-part-of-strategy-to-keep-palestinians-divided-583082) He reportedly said that this was part of Israel’s strategy — to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank. This articulated policies that the Israeli right had been [diligently following](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-11/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-needed-a-strong-hamas/0000018b-1e9f-d47b-a7fb-bfdfd8f30000) for many years. And it led, inexorably and predictably, to the October 7 massacres.

**What Hamas did next**

Israelis, including the national security establishment, were taken aback by the Hamas attack of October 7 because they had wrongly concluded that both Palestinian groups were content to rule their separate fiefdoms and persist in a relative stalemate for dominance of the national movement that played perfectly into Israel’s hands.

What the Israelis had not appreciated is that since Hamas’ founding in 1987, its [prime directive](https://web.archive.org/web/20110818214013/http:/www.nad-plo.org/etemplate.php?id=5) has been to maneuver to take over the Palestinian national movement and, eventually, the PLO with its invaluable international diplomatic presence, including nonmember observer state status at the UN and over 100 embassies around the world.

It was instantly obvious after the October 7 killing spree that the [increasingly unpopular](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/what-palestinians-really-think-hamas) Hamas was [seeking to use violence](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/08/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-gaza-war.html) assert its dominance of the national movement. Indeed, it’s clear that Hamas expected an overwhelming military response from Israel on the ground in Gaza, and that it hopes to provoke a long-term Israeli security presence against which it can, sooner rather than later, organize a sustained and [increasingly powerful insurgency](https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2023/11/07/one-month-into-the-war-the-ball-remains-in-israels-court/).

The obvious goal is to contrast this armed resistance, not just now, but especially in coming years, with PA security cooperation with Israel and the PLO’s unwavering commitment to securing independence through a two-state agreement with Israel.

The only rational choice left for Israel in the wake of October 7 is to finally choose to deal seriously and constructively with the Palestinians who are committed to talking to Israelis, as opposed to bolstering those who want to kill Israelis.

It may go against all the instincts of many Israeli extremists in the current government, including Netanyahu, but if they do not begin to deal seriously, constructively and cooperatively with the PA and the PLO, Hamas and even more extreme groups will continue to thrive.

This means taking any number of obvious measures to strengthen the PA institutionally and politically, including by expanding its authority in the West Bank.

And it means reengaging with the PLO at the negotiating table to seriously discuss a viable accommodation that meets the needs of both peoples.

**Beyond Mahmoud Abbas**

Many Israelis may find it hard to imagine suddenly taking Mahmoud Abbas, who is both the PA president and the PLO chairman, seriously, both because they are used to thinking of him as a spent force and ineffective leader, and because he has lashed out in frustration with language that has been highly offensive, including [regarding the Holocaust](https://theintercept.com/2023/09/15/palestinian-authority-mahmoud-abbas-oslo-accords/).

There is no doubt that Abbas is, in almost every imaginable way, long past his sell-by date. But the old, infirm and chain-smoking politician, who at least has time and again proven his unwavering rejection of violence as a Palestinian national strategy, represents exactly this trend among Palestinians. And when he passes, sooner rather than later, from the scene, he will be replaced by others from the same tendency.

Israelis cannot approach this decisive strategic and political inflection point by focusing on the personality, failures or foibles of Abbas. In many ways, Israel’s consistently hostile policies were the single biggest factor in shaping him into the highly flawed figure he has become.

This is the Palestinian leader who, after all, [resigned](https://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/09/06/mideast/) as Yasser Arafat’s Prime Minister during the second intifada and voluntarily went into an open-ended sojourn in the political wilderness, precisely because he categorically rejected the use of violence.

Moreover, it’s not about Abbas or his inner circle as personalities. It must be about strengthening the hands of Palestinians who sincerely seek an accommodation with Jewish Israelis and represent the primary obstacle to Hamas finally achieving political dominance among Palestinians.

It’s a no-brainer, but Netanyahu and his government show [no signs of understanding](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/12/world/middleeast/netanyahu-gaza-hamas-palestinian-authority.html) the necessity of such a radical policy shift. The Biden administration [appears to understand](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/08/us/politics/blinken-gaza-palestinian-authority.html) the challenge in theory, but how much they can or will do to implement such a revised policy towards the Palestinian political scene is uncertain at best.

Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas are [fighting a war](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-07-23/index.html) that has killed thousands and resulted in a devastating [humanitarian crisis](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/middleeast/map-humanitarian-aid-water-power-hospitals-gaza-strip-dg/) in Gaza.

The Israeli military began an offensive on the Palestinian enclave after Hamas militants launched a brutal assault on Israel on October 7 – the biggest terrorist attack in the country’s history – with gunmen killing more than 1,400 people and taking more than [200 people hostage](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/08/europe/israel-hostages-hamas-what-we-know-intl/index.html), according to Israeli authorities.

Israel’s retaliation [has been fierce](https://www.cnn.com/world/gaza-graveyard-for-children-un-chief-warns-intl-hnk/index.html), with an air, sea and ground campaign on Gaza as well as a total siege on the territory to choke its Hamas rulers.

The conflict has led to a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, with more [than 10,000 people killed](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/06/middleeast/gaza-10k-deaths-intl/index.html) there, according to the Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah. Residents of the Strip, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians, are trapped, lacking basic supplies and with nowhere to escape Israel’s bombs.

In response, aid groups, Arab states and the United Nations have repeatedly called [for a ceasefire](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/31/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-war-tuesday-intl-hnk/index.html) to allow for the delivery of food, water, medical supplies and other necessities.

Israel has so far shown no signs of scaling back its military operation, which is only widening, as it vows to eliminate Hamas once and for all. **How did the conflict start?**

In an operation it called “Al-Aqsa Storm,” Hamas fired thousands of rockets towards Israeli towns on October 7, before breaking through the heavily fortified border fence with Israel and sending militants deep into Israeli territory.

There, gunmen killed civilians and soldiers, and took more than 200 hostages, including dozens of foreign nationals. The attacks were unprecedented in tactics and scale, as Israel hasn’t faced its adversaries on its own territory since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. It has also never faced a terror attack of this magnitude that took the lives of so many civilians.

**How did Israel react?**

Israel responded by launching “Operation Swords of Iron,” with the goal of eliminating Hamas. It imposed a complete siege on Gaza, blocking food, water and fuel from entering, and launched a ground offensive that saw its troops enter deep into the enclave and effectively split it in two.

Amid the bombardment, Gaza residents were advised by Israel to evacuate their homes in the north and move southwards as troops sought to [encircle Gaza City](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-06-23/h_06f86282ebb0e84fe83765d8dcceceb0), which [Israel described as](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-06-23/h_06f86282ebb0e84fe83765d8dcceceb0) “the fortress of Hamas’s terrorist activities.”

Human rights groups have said Israel’s evacuation order [could breach](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-13-23/h_f6a1a9348d4b3ffd0ba22977fa8905ad) international law, and [CNN has documented](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/16/middleeast/israel-palestinian-evacuation-orders-invs/index.html) instances when Palestinian civilians were killed by Israeli strikes around evacuation zones.

**What is the situation in Gaza?**

Before the war, Israel and Egypt imposed a blockade of Gaza that strictly controlled the movement of people and goods both into and out of the territory.

But Israel has now imposed an even tighter siege, banning the entry of food, water and fuel, which the United Nations has said amounts to “[collective punishment](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15473.doc.htm).” Residents are grappling with severe shortages and power is running out as fuel dwindles, with hospitals ill-equipped to treat the wounded as Israel continues its bombardment. Doctors often operate on patients without anesthesia, and maternity and postnatal services are close to non-existent. As the water system collapses, some Gazans have been forced to [drink dirty, salty water](about:blank), sparking concerns of a health crisis and fears that people could start dying from dehydration.

The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has said that more than 1.4 million people in Gaza are now internally displaced. More than half a million are seeking refuge in facilities run by the UN’s Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which are accommodating numbers three times their intended capacity.

Thousands of people are sheltering in hospitals and other civilian facilities, which health workers say have been targeted by Israel.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that it has documented at least 102 attacks on health care facilities in Gaza since October 7. Israel has said it is targeting Hamas operatives in the strip, and accused Hamas of [embedding itself in civilian areas](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-19-23/h_64ad641de1f6d744171d97271515a3be), as well as using civilians as human shields.

Out of those who have been killed in the enclave, more than 4,100 are children, according to the Gazan health ministry.

The enclave has been described by the UN as “a graveyard for children.”

**What is the Rafah crossing?**

Israel has shut its two border crossings with Gaza. And with aid desperately needed, the only route for its entry into the territory is through [the Rafah Crossing](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/rafah-crossing-gaza-egypt-explainer-intl) with Egypt.

Rafah is the sole border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, falling along an 8-mile (12.8-kilometer) fence that separates Gaza from the Sinai Peninsula.

The crossing has been essential for the delivery of aid and evacuation of wounded Palestinians during previous wars with Israel.

Following intense negotiations, the crossing was finally opened more than three weeks into the war, allowing a small number of wounded [Palestinians and foreign nationals](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/rafah-border-crossing-egypt-foreign-nationals-gaza-intl-hnk/index.html) to leave Gaza. Aid trucks have started entering the enclave in very small numbers

**How has the international community reacted to the war?**

The US has largely supported Israel’s operation in Gaza throughout the war, despite heavy criticism from some opponents at home and mass protests across the world calling for a ceasefire.

Arab leaders have delivered strong messages to Israel, especially against what they perceive as plans to expel Palestinians from Gaza into Egypt, and those in the West Bank to Jordan.

US President Joe Biden has said that it would be a [“mistake”](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/16/biden-sot-israel-gaza-invasion-ac360-vpx.cnn) for Israel to occupy Gaza, but Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel will have the “overall security responsibility” in Gaza for an “[indefinite period](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-07-23/h_6c2f0fc9f642babff0a526a1a1d7b0e5)” after the war ends.

Some of Hamas’ allies in the region, such as Iran and Lebanon’s powerful Iran-backed Hezbollah movement, have also warned Israel and Washington against continued bombing of Gaza.

Amid rising death tolls and an international outcry over the humanitarian situation in Gaza, however, the Biden administration [has been warning Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/02/politics/biden-administration-warning-israel-gaza-civilians/index.html) that its support for the carnage in the enclave is running out.

**What will it take for de-escalation?**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [has said](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-04-23/h_cf4d5244a60cc0817f6f84c65adac1e8) his government opposes any temporary ceasefire in Gaza unless Hamas frees [all the hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/08/europe/israel-hostages-hamas-what-we-know-intl/index.html) it holds, adding that it will continue to block fuel from entering the strip. Netanyahu has however said he is open to short pauses taking place.

Israel has accused Hamas of hoarding and diverting fuel. CNN cannot independently verify the amount of fuel in the enclave.

Qatar, a US ally that maintains ties with Hamas, has been trying to mediate deals to free hostages, as well as evacuate foreign nationals from Gaza.

Four hostages held by Hamas – two Israelis and two American-Israelis – have so far been freed through Qatari and Egyptian mediation

**How likely is this war to escalate into a regional conflict?**

The Hamas attack raised concerns that the conflict could spread across the region, with the potential entry of Hezbollah from Lebanon as well as Israel’s arch enemy Iran.

The US has warned regional players against getting pulled into the war, [calling on Iran and its proxies](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/02/politics/us-intelligence-iran-proxies/index.html) not to escalate.

The US military has [said that a guided missile](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/05/politics/us-missile-submarine-middle-east) submarine has arrived [in the Middle East](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/05/politics/us-missile-submarine-middle-east), a message of deterrence directed at regional adversaries. The Pentagon last month ordered a [second carrier strike group](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/14/middleeast/us-aircraft-carrier-eisenhower-israel-gaza-intl-hnk-ml/index.html) to the eastern Mediterranean and sent Air Force fighter jets to the region.

[Iran](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/27/middleeast/iran-may-not-want-full-war-israel-mime-intl/index.html), which backs Hamas, has [denied involvement](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukOe92anlFk) in the October 7 attack but has said that it morally supports the “anti-Israel resistance” – which includes Hamas, Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias.

On Israel’s northern border, Iran-backed Hezbollah has engaged in an exchange of fire since the Gaza war began. Those altercations have however been confined to the border areas.

There have [also been skirmishes in Syria and Iraq](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/27/middleeast/iran-may-not-want-full-war-israel-mime-intl/index.html), from which Iran-backed militias have launched multiple drone attacks on US forces. Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthis have attempted an aerial attack on Israel, which Israel’s military [said it thwarted](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/israel-says-it-thwarted-attacks-from-yemens-houthis-intl-hnk/index.html).

[In a November 3 speech](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-03-23/h_159ef931dd83c8d040b0eaf4d7e8f64f), Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said his “primary goal” was to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza, and said it was incumbent on the US to implement the cessation of hostilities. The speech appeared to show that Nasrallah’s immediate plans do not include broadening the conflict.

More than four months after Hamas, the Iran-backed Islamist group that rules Gaza, launched a brutal attack on Israel, triggering a ferocious response, diplomats [met in Cairo](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-13-24/h_325b0d2a1a3c91544eac61ea7b68be05) this week aiming to reach a temporary ceasefire.Despite the participation of CIA Director William Burns, Mossad chief David Barnea, and other heavyweights, the talks did not succeed and there’s some [question](https://urldefense.com/v3/__https:/mailtrack.io/l/712b2a8d78892ee4dc9e6473ecf28a7127e148bd?url=https*3A*2F*2Furldefense.com*2Fv3*2F__https*3A*2Fmailtrack.io*2Fl*2Ff69cb5b181d48233de98a36b22eebcd0fbab5418*3Furl*3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.bloomberg.com*2Fnews*2Farticles*2F2024-02-14*2Fisrael-pulls-out-of-peace-talks-over-delusional-hamas-demands) about whether they [will continue](https://mailtrack.io/l/a7f5d3f168621d88f74c3e905db2b4e750535ca8?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F7a77d3e83044fc01766314457fa3211229f60365%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.nytimes.com*2Flive*2F2024*2F02*2F14*2Fworld*2Fisrael-hamas-war-gaza-news*2Ftalks-in-cairo-over-a-cease-fire-are-extended-for-three-days-but-a-deal-remains-elusive%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3Dcf577abd27cf859b__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUlJQ!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOrfqeunC%24&u=3243276&signature=fc968f62538d9726).

In the meantime, prominent figures across the globe are urging Israel [not to launch](https://mailtrack.io/l/b8e189825d0beee493b07e1c105a32d34e3e53e4?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F6a81d43f008c12a4635c22c666324b762c4297e6%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2024*2F02*2F14*2Fmiddleeast*2Frafah-international-opposition-israel-ground-offensive-intl-hnk*2Findex.html%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D2b35529ad459e807__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOlBrlywf%24&u=3243276&signature=c5959bd26d86dcd2) an offensive in Rafah, the Gaza city on the border with Egypt which remains a stronghold of Hamas brigades, and where [more than a million civilians](https://mailtrack.io/l/e0b862e18daeb44bb9cabd3e00a5969395e3a9c3?url=https%3A%2F%2Fedition.cnn.com%2F2024%2F02%2F06%2Fmiddleeast%2Fpalestinians-trapped-rafah-israeli-offensive-intl&u=3243276&signature=e532c9b29dd90e15), most of them displaced by the fighting, have taken shelter amid widespread devastation across the strip.

Rafah encapsulates the perverse genius of the Hamas strategy, and the unwinnable moral dilemmas it created with the war it deliberately provoked.

By launching a brutal attack on Israel, committing large scale [sexual violence](https://mailtrack.io/l/e47ef31a60ca604c99e44f1b8722a0d8bc9936b7?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2023%2F12%2F28%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Foct-7-attacks-hamas-israel-sexual-violence.html&u=3243276&signature=e67a9fc92278b33e), and taking hundreds of hostages, it ensured that Israel would counteract with overwhelming force. By [embedding itself in the population](https://mailtrack.io/l/f1a31f64aa53cad927061e788d8a34758090aec8?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fworld%2F2023%2Foct%2F30%2Fhuman-shield-israel-claim-hamas-command-centre-under-hospital-palestinian-civilian-gaza-city&u=3243276&signature=378dc6fbd9de3846), it guaranteed that Israel’s response would bring enormous suffering to Palestinians, knowing that Israel would take the blame and [Hamas’s support would surge](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/21/middleeast/palestinians-back-hamas-survey-intl-cmd/index.html), particularly in the West Bank, where Fatah, its Palestinian rival, dominates.

The crux of the matter remains how to make Hamas relinquish power in Gaza. If Hamas leaders leave, surrender, or lay down their arms, the war could end.

Israel’s critics demanding an immediate ceasefire may believe Israel should accept Hamas’s continuing control of Gaza, but Israelis, divided on political and social issues, are convinced of the [justness of their cause](https://mailtrack.io/l/9a5900f3eba46535f245e8da34e65ded464a2e6c?url=https%3A%2F%2Fapnews.com%2Farticle%2Fisrael-gaza-hamas-palestinians-war-mood-0cebcbcf0550ee08c0d757334f69851d&u=3243276&signature=12bff6883d7547e8).

Hamas leaders vow that massacres like they committed on October 7 [will happen “again and again,”](https://mailtrack.io/l/0039c5698ac2b4825046bbf295829f788ee31354?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.memri.org%2Freports%2Fhamas-official-ghazi-hamad-we-will-repeat-october-7-attack-time-and-again-until-israel&u=3243276&signature=0bd16473ff5e50bf) that Israel cannot be allowed to exist. Its political leaders, in comfortable exile, acknowledge the tactics will prove costly, but dismiss the casualties among their own people saying “[We are proud to sacrifice martyrs](https://mailtrack.io/l/38e4fdf6f30d508e87d95a807dcce3f7286e60c6?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.memri.org%2Freports%2Fhamas-official-ghazi-hamad-we-will-repeat-october-7-attack-time-and-again-until-israel&u=3243276&signature=192f5e4ed67a5dd7).”

With every passing day, however, with every Israeli bomb, with every death and injury among the besieged Palestinians, the pressure on Israel grows, even as Hamas remains defiant, [hoping to survive](https://mailtrack.io/l/697600a8a0db775668100c75678783a403063d68?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.reuters.com%2Fworld%2Fmiddle-east%2Fhow-hamas-aims-trap-israel-gaza-quagmire-2023-11-03%2F&u=3243276&signature=27ca9d471b278966) the war as a power in Gaza.

Hamas, classified as a [terrorist group](https://mailtrack.io/l/223fcd9c548116fbdc65275721d65d25366984dd?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2Ff0c4583c9d65beaaae6f6275427527d4b2491bb4%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cfr.org*2Fbackgrounder*2Fwhat-hamas%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D9ae35d701845c4e6__%3BJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOo9Yc0Kp%24&u=3243276&signature=520a28dff725ffa3) by many countries, not only [rejects the existence of Israel](https://mailtrack.io/l/495877f505817c27eee31955e28b1230abd03abc?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F3e8a0a0e3f1e3049e078d46681d92c9e99529d24%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Favalon.law.yale.edu*2F20th_century*2Fhamas.asp%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3De8a9d24b2d0dfb2f__%3BJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOql6znr7%24&u=3243276&signature=768dd30bad0efdcc). It is a [repressive](https://mailtrack.io/l/f3241d96c5f8db36f0d4f02b1f04f35fdf163a9d?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F7c75eea254af1840c7f44efe972349810dba3f96%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.amnesty.org*2Fen*2Flatest*2Fpress-release*2F2019*2F03*2Fgaza-hamas-must-end-brutal-crackdown-against-protesters-and-rights-defenders*2F%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D709f8ffd00d2155a__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUlJQ!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOtG4evLF%24&u=3243276&signature=68d3522f76846f3e), fundamentalist, [homophobic](https://mailtrack.io/l/7cc1920b4bc32f60dc4933910c54b6473b690c5b?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F49257a130975077a88eb3fbe96a657c5cfe7d77b%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.i24news.tv*2Fen*2Fnews*2Fmiddle-east*2Fpalestinian-territories*2F1660138495-exclusive-gay-man-who-fled-gaza-speaks-about-experience-with-hamas%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D57ea2e1ce6107194__%3BJSUlJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOl-Xg1o0%24&u=3243276&signature=812916a47f6f09eb), dictatorial power in the Gaza strip. It was elected in 2006, but then [brutalized](https://mailtrack.io/l/d052c0242059dc91a253252cc9b76c146317bc56?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F4523ab885a3be95d683f7ada51af8d21fb9a92f3%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.seattletimes.com*2Fnation-world*2Fgaza-foes-tossed-from-buildings*2F%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3Df232745cc6a8b994__%3BJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOt7oY6qY%24&u=3243276&signature=a114c3a091ee0ddb) its foes and became a dictatorship, funneling foreign aid to boost its [financial empire](https://mailtrack.io/l/7039bc177b69bdfbb6b5ef37796671a4f4541598?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.reuters.com%2Fworld%2Fmiddle-east%2Fhamas-cash-to-crypto-global-finance-maze-israels-sights-2023-10-16%2F&u=3243276&signature=bc91849a2e780a8c) and build tunnels and rockets.

This conflict may be creating more terrorists than it is eliminating, but it is clear that it cannot end with Hamas still in control of Gaza. That would ensure that there’s no peace for Israel or Palestinians on either side of the border, a perpetual war.

The diplomats’ immediate goal is to craft a formula for a temporary ceasefire and a release of some of the more than 130 Israeli hostages — an unknown number of them already dead — that Hamas is still holding after its October 7 rampage, when they brutalized families, women and children, children killing some 1,200 and kidnapping some 240 people in Israel, most of them civilians. The hostages would be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.

But the larger goal, beyond this short-term objective, is to leverage the deal to build a permanent ceasefire; to end the war so that the region, and the world, can move to the even more complicated matter, the most crucial of all, of what happens the “day after,” when the war ends.

Among those raising alarms about a Rafah operation is President Joe Biden, who has become increasingly critical of Israel’s conduct of the war, calling it [“over the top”](https://mailtrack.io/l/a302d038aeb0dd7d18a06e3147200bec337bc15b?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2024%2F02%2F12%2Fpolitics%2Fbiden-netanyahu-israel-gaza%2Findex.html%23%3A~3Atext%3DSo%2520far%252C%2520Biden%2520has%2520stopped%2Cthe%2520military%2520effort%2520against%2520Hamas.&u=3243276&signature=a6a15f9e4cbdea61) and is demanding that Israel provide a credible plan for protecting the civilian population before it goes into Rafah

Israel is putting together controversial plans to temporarily [relocate civilians](https://mailtrack.io/l/ed9662e5fd7a0eb535952980359c09be588589eb?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wsj.com%2Fworld%2Fmiddle-east%2Fisrael-rescues-two-hostages-held-by-hamas-in-gaza-ec5ca99a&u=3243276&signature=1c6d4a6a3ccdf6a6) to 15 tent cities along the coast, according to the Wall Street Journal. However, no official evacuation plan has been announced.

Israelis see the situation in stark terms.

Traveling to The Hague to file war crimes complaints against Hamas, Ofri Bibas, whose brother, his wife and two children — one of them a [nine- month-old baby](https://mailtrack.io/l/66c0fd3db6e0d32c5ba385b3609523cbfc5173fe?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F5e528e95bdd50d4da6d4ebfab503c55bd933edc8%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2024*2F01*2F18*2Fmiddleeast*2Fkfir-bibas-first-birthday-youngest-hostage-in-gaza-intl*2Findex.html%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D03defcbc3a0c8971__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOmrMqBI7%24&u=3243276&signature=b98420ccf7c7613a) — were kidnapped and have not been released, called Hamas “the [successors of Hitler](https://mailtrack.io/l/4296dc29df72eb49ac32e29907ffc067f5cf862c?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2Ff3dc9d59cb7914382a880af07b1a566a25403ee6%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.timesofisrael.com*2Fhamas-is-hitlers-successor-hostages-families-head-to-the-hague-to-file-complaint*2F%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D325e00f11b9ea559__%3BJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOvOrOvEB%24&u=3243276&signature=4e143cfb52ec3bfa), Eichmann and Goebbels…”

Seeking a solution, Biden is [exasperated](https://mailtrack.io/l/d1c4c116f063395f634e4b75cc592736352fda5c?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2Fa12767059a47163c0fc3e84488d42751f96a288d%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.nbcnews.com*2Fnews*2Finvestigations*2Fbiden-disparages-netanyahu-private-hasnt-changed-us-policy-israel-rcna138282%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3Dc4664bcb9a59092f__%3BJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOjXYuRZP%24&u=3243276&signature=79ba6ca793f5c0a8) with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is also [profoundly unpopular](https://mailtrack.io/l/8bb811cc7dfc9384ba9b04982cc610edce3ed148?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2Fb55acdc7ad4d6e2e7d504d9ba0c06b4ba53aa75c%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.npr.org*2F2023*2F11*2F11*2F1211767117*2Fisrael-netanyahu-growing-opposition-hamas-war-gaza%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D555e8f3e826e796a__%3BJSUlJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOt-5c0fM%24&u=3243276&signature=67e6b5612543f26a) in Israel and remains in power only because of support from extreme right-wingers in his coalition. Biden is publicly demanding that Israel take more care to protect civilians.

Standing with Jordan’s King Abdullah, Biden correctly described October 7 as “the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust.” He added, [also correctly](https://mailtrack.io/l/e4f7fbc8ac9de91d340cf9c25c3b221f8e76f3b7?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F43420202754a2de0f1daecbf6ded24434cb9e99d%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.whitehouse.gov*2Fbriefing-room*2Fspeeches-remarks*2F2024*2F02*2F12*2Fremarks-by-president-biden-and-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-of-jordan-after-a-meeting*2F*3Forder*3DNAMEFIRST%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D39de26b485e13728__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOsa3rzz7%24&u=3243276&signature=d7f57842c764d25c), that “the Palestinian people have also suffered unimaginable pain and loss.” The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry in Gaza says 27,000 have died in the war. It doesn’t distinguish combatants from non-combatants, but it’s beyond doubt that thousands of civilians have been killed, including large numbers of children. And the living are enduring excruciating conditions.

It may seem that the administration is sending mixed signals, but a closer look shows a nuanced position that not only maintains strong support for Israel, but also continues to endorse the uprooting of Hamas, including in Rafah.

National Security spokesman John Kirby said this week, “We never said that they can’t go into Rafah and remove Hamas,” arguing that Hamas remains a threat and Israel will continue to go after its leadership and infrastructure, “[as they should](https://mailtrack.io/l/796d2b0d7add2eb481b8640cccae353c784e281c?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F3ac61d542d522602b65d35f98b48d40af7b6bc7b%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.whitehouse.gov*2Fbriefing-room*2Fpress-briefings*2F2024*2F02*2F12*2Fpress-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-white-house-national-security-communications-advisor-john-kirby*2F%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3Dd1f145415d3cc13b__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUlJQ!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOgErPmix%24&u=3243276&signature=9961026a1274cd54).”

In the meantime, talks about what should happen in Gaza the “day after” are moving forward quietly, out of the spotlight.

The New York Times reported that officials from [six Arab countries](https://mailtrack.io/l/9f2bed69f0efa58143812c0e5c629bee96313380?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F22a0672e91d034039e451372553ea347607e70f3%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.nytimes.com*2F2024*2F02*2F14*2Fworld*2Fmiddleeast*2Fmohammed-dahlan-interview-gaza-uae.html%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D616fcf354ecc4fae__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOkLaMpPw%24&u=3243276&signature=e887715507a3a82b) recently met in Saudi Arabia to discuss the prospects.

Even though Arab leaders are publicly critical of Israel, there’s little doubt that many of them wish fervently to see Hamas, which is backed by their regional foe Iran, removed from power. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and others, would like to see Hamas soundly defeated.

One [post-war scenario](https://mailtrack.io/l/ad24e2c52f905107555797dd4dc77da078125e5b?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2Fb7387e30f5f112ae3a9534c2b584a7598cf3cc5f%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.nytimes.com*2F2024*2F02*2F14*2Fworld*2Fmiddleeast*2Fmohammed-dahlan-interview-gaza-uae.html%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D75290954768c6eb7__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOjHRlm37%24&u=3243276&signature=ad72e1e269a57e4d) said to be gaining support among Sunni leaders is the formation of a new Palestinian administration, replacing the unpopular Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, to run Gaza backed by Arab troops from countries like the United Arab Emirates and perhaps Saudi Arabia, which is reportedly willing to establish diplomatic relations with Israel if it agrees to a path toward the creation of a Palestinian state.

For now, Israelis — still smarting from the trauma of October 7, with hostages still in Hamas’s hands, and with [surveys](https://mailtrack.io/l/04e7f93c9529f5b4187790429834d4677f6bccfd?url=https%3A%2F%2Fedition.cnn.com%2F2023%2F12%2F21%2Fmiddleeast%2Fpalestinians-back-hamas-survey-intl-cmd%2Findex.html&u=3243276&signature=7b9e18dc1f8e0e94) showing most Palestinians approved of Hamas’s decision to launch its onslaught — are in no mood to endorse a Palestinian state.

Netanyahu has called the idea “[delusional](https://mailtrack.io/l/4e76c3c39941e3324083a698815c59fbb92f3856?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F36eefdf89bda0725d4f49c20c2e17e30bf0f7517%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2024*2F01*2F18*2Fpolitics*2Fnetanyahu-biden-palestinian-state*2Findex.html%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D4a503228d4217c36__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOgTGQuLF%24&u=3243276&signature=34ca63b9806ab237).” But if Hamas is uprooted – a prerequisite for genuine progress — the government of Israel could change. Polls predict Netanyahu [would be crushed](https://mailtrack.io/l/a56d4b305a2d6955c58fbdfff60f8b785b0cd0ad?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Fl%2F398bdace304061b594d39794f14daedccdc63da4%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.timesofisrael.com*2Fnew-poll-shows-anti-netanyahu-bloc-with-75-seats-smotrich-on-the-brink*2F%26u%3D3243276%26signature%3D116a09aa1f57dc96__%3BJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kRDs_5CrsbcC4uwJ9MXY0PfGHepkpOQqoMQoYot5ze-H6-vEUe_FKOoC3VMD3JVg5zp8xVqQOpbgg5B_%24&u=3243276&signature=2cd922da085560bd) in another election.

The sentiment in Israel could also change if the hostages return and if Arab countries offer steady reassurance. But before the war can end, before the wounds can begin to heal on both sides, Hamas has to be removed from power.

On February 1, I met US Secretary of State Antony Blinken for a 90-minute private discussion on the situation in Gaza.I was seated directly across the table from Blinken in an ornate meeting room at the State Department. Blinken was flanked by advisors. I sat alongside a handful of fellow Palestinian Americans.Some of the invited Palestinian Americans [declined to attend](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/palestinian-americans-skip-blinken-meeting-gaza/index.html), pointing out that there is nothing more that administration officials “need to hear or see to compel them to end their complicity in this genocide,” referring to the situation in Gaza.

I shared some of their concerns. But I decided to attend because I felt it was my duty as a Palestinian American with family in Gaza whose lives hang in the balance to let the secretary know directly the horrors and war crimes he is aiding and abetting.

Throughout our discussion, Blinken took extensive notes and nodded attentively. As we ran well past our scheduled time, he insisted on extending the discussion.

I am Rajaie Batniji.

I take no pride and no honor in being here.

Many of my fellow Palestinian Americans discouraged me from speaking with you today, concerned that this discussion was solely performative. I share their concern.

I come here out of a sense of duty, to try – as futile as it may be – to save my family in Gaza from being killed.

I was born in Gaza and immigrated to California as a young child.

I grew up visiting Gaza often, and those visits shaped me in many ways. I personally experienced some of the violence of occupation.

I studied the history of the region at Stanford, completed my doctorate in international relations at Oxford as a [Marshall Scholar](https://www.marshallscholarship.org/) – honoring the legacy of one of your predecessors in this office – and became a physician focused on the health of those that have the least privilege.

I’m an entrepreneur who builds teams and technologies that improve American health care.

I would rather not be here today.

Mr. Secretary, you have provided the weapons and the political cover that enabled the murder of 65 members of my family, mostly women and children, over the past four months. In strikes in mid-November, three generations of my family were killed by missiles as they sought shelter and safety. I carry their memories with me. I see their crushed bodies when I close my eyesThe survivors in my family are homeless. Some 70% of homes in Gaza have been destroyed, according to an [analysis by The Wall Street Journal](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/gaza-destruction-bombing-israel-aa528542?mod=hp_lead_pos7), along with [almost all the schools, all the universities](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-122-0), [many of the hospitals](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2024/01/middleeast/gaza-hospitals-destruction-investigation-intl-cmd/), [the mosques, the churches, the historical sites](https://www.unesco.org/en/gaza/assessment) and the [public records.](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/-israel-destroyed-central-archives-of-gaza-city-head-of-gaza-municipality/3068555)

My paternal grandparents’ home in Shejaiya had been among the last homes of my family still standing. This is the home where I was born. It collapsed in a “[controlled demolition](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/01/world/middleeast/Israel-gaza-war-demolish.html)” just before the new year.

According to our own US intelligence agencies, Israel used [29,000 air-to-ground munitions](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/13/politics/intelligence-assessment-dumb-bombs-israel-gaza/index.html#:~:text=The%20assessment%2C%20compiled%20by%20the,guided%20munitions%2C%20the%20assessment%20says.) during the first two months of its assault on Gaza. That’s more than were used in the [years of the Iraq War](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/gaza-destruction-bombing-israel-aa528542) – and Gaza is less than one thousandth the size.

No one I know in Gaza has a home, or possessions beyond what they carried as they fled Israeli bombardment.

My family may be better off than most in Gaza and they are still hungry.I spoke with my mom’s brother this week, and he told me he has lost almost 20 kilograms (44 pounds). Despite your promises, food aid has not been able to reach Gaza to come anywhere near meeting the need. It is blocked at every opportunity, including by [Israeli protestors at the Kerem Shalom](https://www.npr.org/2024/02/12/1230362633/gaza-food-hunger-israel-protests#:~:text=At%20the%20Kerem%20Shalom%20border%20crossing%2C%20they've%20thrown%20themselves,where%20they%20blockaded%20other%20trucks.) border crossing, and by [Israeli inspections and within Gaza by the Israeli military.](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/11/middleeast/why-only-a-trickle-of-aid-is-getting-into-gaza-mime-intl/index.html)

According to the United Nations, [4 out of 5 of the hungriest people anywhere in the world are in Gaza.](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-12-22/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-the-media-the-situation-gaza%C2%A0#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20World%20Food,water%20is%20at%20a%20trickle.) You know that the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, [provides food for most Gazans](https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/features/we-count-support-unrwa-food-assistance-lifeline-palestine-refugees) and critical infrastructure for other aid organizations. Yet, after Israel made unverified allegations that a handful of UNRWA staff participated in the October 7 attacks, you [cut the funding for UNRWA](https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/31/politics/trump-administration-ending-funding-palestinian-refugees/index.html) in what I can understand only as an act of collective punishment. I fear this makes you, and me – as an American – party to the use of starvation as a weapon of war.

My cousins in Gaza, who are physicians like me, have no place to practice medicine. Their hospitals have been destroyed or incapacitated. After moving from Shifa to al-Aqsa hospital, only to be evacuated from each by the Israeli military after seeing patients and colleagues killed, they are now living in tents in Rafah and al-Mawasi, using their surgical skills to repair leaks in their tents while the bodies of wounded Palestinians go untreated, and often unretrieved.

I have worked extensively in global health and wrote a series of [research papers](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(09)60110-0/abstract) in 2009 on what we thought then was a Palestinian health crisis. We could never, though, have imagined this – the complete destruction of Gaza’s health care system is unprecedented.

Even the dead among my family were not spared. [Satellite images show](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/20/middleeast/israel-gaza-cemeteries-desecrated-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html) that Israeli bulldozers and tanks desecrated the graveyards where my grandparents and great grandparents were resting. I hope to bury their remains again one day.

What do you wish to be your legacy, Secretary Blinken? You cannot say you didn’t know. You cannot say that you did not knowingly and materially support these deaths, which a [US federal court](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/01/genocide-gaza-israel-california-court) and the International Court of Justice have both determined [plausibly constitute genocide](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/04/middleeast/israeli-soldiers-political-war/index.html).

I am the father of three young children in San Francisco. As adults, I am certain they will reflect on this “genocide” with horror. It will be taught in our classrooms and remembered in our museums as we vow never to repeat it.

I ask you to use your power, which can stop the killing of our families, to call for an immediate ceasefire and to stop sending weapons to Israel. You and the president may be the only two people with the power to make this stop.

I ask you to use the full power of your office and every bit of leverage the US has to allow aid to reach all of Gaza, including in the north, where hundreds of thousands of people remain in desperation. And, to resume the funding for UNRWA, which will be essential to the distribution of any aid.

I ask you to uphold a rules-based order – which serves our long-term interests – by calling Israel’s indiscriminate bombing that has largely killed [women and children](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/01/press-release-two-mothers-are-killed-in-gaza-every-hour-as-fighting-exceeds-100-days#:~:text=And%20the%20demographic%20percentage%20has,the%20beginning%20of%20the%20crisis.), the attacks on health care and the use of [starvation as a weapon of war](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza) as the war crimes you and I know they are. Your words matter, Mr. Secretary.

I feel indignity sitting before you in this comfortable conference room while my family desperately awaits word about a ceasefire, in the dark, hungry, and in tents in fear that the Israeli military will kill them at any moment.

In a dignified world, I would be asking for justice, not mercy. That day will come.

I hope that you, and this administration, can act quickly to bring our nation to the right side of history before it is far too late.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu boasted in August that [the Palestinian issue](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/07/middleeast/israel-palestinian-hamas-conflict-escalation-explained-mime-intl/index.html) had become a mere “check box” for Arab states that were looking to establish ties with the Jewish state, suggesting that it was a matter of lip service to an outdated cause.

“You have to check it to say that you’re doing it,” [he said](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2023-08-07/israel-s-netanyahu-on-judicial-reform-saudi-arabia-ai-full-interview). The Palestinian issue, he said, is brought up “a lot less than you think” in negotiations [with Arab states](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/22/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-cnn-interview-intl/index.html).

A month later, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) acknowledged the existence of [talks to normalize](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/21/middleeast/saudi-arabia-mbs-interview-fox-intl/index.html) relations with Israel. In return for recognition, he said, Israel would have to “ease the life of the Palestinians,” stopping short of calling for a Palestinian state and effectively abandoning a two-decade-old [Saudi pledge](http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/03/28/arab.initiative.text/index.html) to only make peace with Israel after it fully withdraws from land it occupies.

But Hamas’ [brutal weekend attack](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-10-11-23/index.html) on Israel has thrust the Palestinian issue back into the international spotlight and may have thrown a wrench in Israel’s efforts to expand what Netanyahu calls the “circle of peace,” referring to Arab nations that have sidestepped the Palestinian issue to establish ties with Israel.

The assault, which killed 1,200 people in Israel and prompted Israeli airstrikes that killed 1,055 in Gaza, was a “game-changing event” for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to Omar Rahman, a fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs who focuses on Palestinian issues.

“For years, (Israeli) leaders have believed they can isolate Palestinians in ghettoized enclaves indefinitely,” he told CNN. “The international community no longer seems to care, and the Palestinians’ Arab allies are embracing [the most right-wing government](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/02/middleeast/netanyahu-israel-election-results-intl/index.html) in Israeli history. This has left Palestinians with no hope or political horizon, facing a future of permanent subjugation.”

A Saudi-Israeli deal would have been a major diplomatic victory for Netanyahu in his efforts to end Israel’s regional isolation without making notable compromises to the Palestinians, and a significant foreign policy achievement for the Biden administration ahead of next year’s presidential elections.

The Arab trend to normalize relations with Israel started in 2020, when [the United Arab Emirates](https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/13/politics/israel-united-arab-emirates-normalization-trump/index.html), Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan recognized the Jewish state while lending rhetorical support to the Palestinian cause. The deal, dubbed the Abraham Accords, was facilitated by the Trump administration and touted as a historic turning point in the region.

**Normalization as a cornerstone of US policy**

The United States has made Arab-Israeli normalization a cornerstone [of its Middle East policy](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/08/politics/blinken-saudi-arabia/index.html), which critics say has come at the expense of more pressing matters. The sidelining of the Palestinians from such deals has been criticized in many quarters.

When the UAE recognized Israel in 2020, it said that doing so was conditional on Israel giving up plans to annex parts of the West Bank, but critics have said that the text of the agreement made no mention of the condition and only references [the Palestinian issue twice](https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/21/politics/trump-biden-middle-east-analysis-intl/index.html).

“The Biden administration is chasing this shiny new toy called normalization,” said Khaled Elgindy, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute and director of its Program on Palestine and Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

The international community had become complacent to the plight of the Palestinians and moved on, he said, adding that last weekend’s events could put the issue “back on the regional, international and great power agenda.”

Jordan’s King Abdullah [lambasted](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/jordans-king-abdullah-you-cant-parachute-over-palestine-make-peace-israel) the Saudi-Israeli normalization process last month, saying that even those Arab states that have already recognized Israel find themselves [in a tough position](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/04/middleeast/israel-uae-ben-gvir-mime-intl/index.html) “when Israelis and Palestinians are dying.”

This belief, by some in the region, that you can parachute over Palestine, deal with the Arabs and work your way back — that does not work,” he said at a conference in New York. (Netanyahu told CNN last month he believes that making peace with Saudi Arabia could eventually lead to [peace with the Palestinians](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/22/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-cnn-interview-intl/index.html).)

In a scathing editorial on the day of the Hamas attack, Israel’s most prominent left-wing newspaper Haaretz put the blame [squarely on Netanyahu](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2023-10-08/ty-article-opinion/netanyahu-bears-responsibility/0000018b-0b9d-d8fc-adff-6bfd1c880000) for, among other reasons, “embracing a foreign policy that openly ignored the existence and rights of Palestinians” while trying to reach an agreement with Saudi Arabia.

Elham Fakhro, a research associate at London’s Chatham House and author of a forthcoming book on Arab-Israeli normalization, said Saudi normalization talks cannot proceed while Israel is at war with Gaza.

“Both (Presidents Donald) Trump and (Joe) Biden made Arab normalization with Israel their main diplomatic focus in the region while neglecting to advance any kind of meaningful peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians,” she told CNN. “The dramatic escalation in the conflict we are witnessing today is a direct result of this neglect.”

But the US is keen not to let last weekend’s attacks get in the way of normalization.

“We still believe that normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia is not only good for the people of those two nations, but for the American people and for everybody else in the region,” US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby [said on Tuesday](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/10/10/virtual-on-the-record-gaggle-by-nsc-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-on-hamas-terrorist-attacks-in-israel/). “And we have every intention to continue to encourage a process where normalization can occur.”

**Saudi takes a traditional approach**

Prospects of Saudi-Israel normalization appeared to have reached such an advanced level that just last month, the Biden administration presented to the world a landmark plan to [connect India to Europe](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/11/middleeast/us-india-gulf-europe-corridor-mime-intl/index.html) through a maritime and rail trade network that would also link Saudi Arabia to Israel. The plan was widely perceived as challenging China’s trade ambitions and would presumably have been activated after Saudi Arabia and Israel normalized ties.

But the Hamas attacks on Israel, and Israel’s deadly response to them, have prompted Riyadh to take a more traditional approach to the conflict.

Responding to the attack on Saturday, Saudi Arabia blamed Israel for its “continuing occupation and depriving the Palestinian people of their legitimate rights,” stopping short of condemning Hamas, which is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood group that Riyadh considers a terror organization. [MBS spoke](https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N1977132) to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on the phone on Tuesday and expressed solidarity.

On Monday, prominent Saudi commentator Mohammed Al Yahya wrote [in a Washington Post article](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/10/09/israel-saudi-arabia-hamas-iran/) that Saudi officials were frustrated at the notion that they had become indifferent to the Palestinian cause. But he said that the idea of a total Israeli withdrawal from the territory it captured in the 1967 war, as previously demanded by Saudi Arabia, was “dated.”

Arab nations that normalized relations with Israel in 2020 appear to have done so despite strong public opposition to the move, [according to a poll](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-public-opinion-arab-israeli-normalization-and-abraham-accords) last year by the Washington Institute. Public sentiment against normalization may harden further if Israel conducts a potentially devastating ground invasion into Gaza, adding more pressure from the Arab street. In the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, around three-quarters of their populations were opposed to normalizing with Israel, the poll found.

“I think the ultimate objective (from the Hamas operation) is to ensure that there’s no going back to the status quo ante,” said Elgindy. “The goal was to shatter this sense of Israeli complacency.”

The Israeli military has told all civilians in Gaza City [to evacuate “southwards”](https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-13-23/h_d5b0c4f36adfd60ae650ee9f9caf1b7b) as it maintains its bombardment of the coastal enclave in response to last weekend’s Hamas attacks that killed more than 1,400 peopleEvacuating would involve moving more than 1.1 million people from the north to the south of the besieged enclave, amid constant airstrikes – a task that the United Nations says is dangerous and unfeasible.

Israeli war planes have been pounding Gaza for a week, leveling entire neighborhoods, including schools and mosques. Israel says it strikes Hamas targets and that the group has used civilians as human shields.

Israel’s assault has killed at least 2,670 people in Gaza, and injured more than 9,600 others. Nearly 1 million Palestinians in Gaza have been forced from their homes, the UN has said.

**What happened?**

Militants from Gaza fired thousands of rockets towards Israeli towns on October 7, before breaking through the heavily fortified border fence with Israel and sending militants deep into Israeli territory. There, Hamas gunmen killed more than 1,400 [people](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/kibbutz-beeri-israel-war-intl-cmd/index.html), including civilians and soldiers, and took up to 150 hostages, according to Israeli authorities.

The attacks were unprecedented in tactics and scale as Israel has not faced its adversaries in street battles on its own territory since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. It has also never faced a terror attack of this magnitude that has taken the lives of so many civilians. While Hamas has kidnapped Israelis before, it has never before taken dozens of hostages at once, including children and the elderly.

A senior Hamas official in Lebanon told a Russian state-backed channel that the group had been preparing for the attack for two years.

Hamas called the operation “Al-Aqsa Storm” and said that it was a response to what it described as Israeli attacks on women, the desecration of the [al-Aqsa mosque](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/05/middleeast/israel-al-aqsa-mosque-clash-intl-hnk/index.html) in Jerusalem and the ongoing siege of Gaza.

They said the bodies of some 1,500 Hamas fighters had been recovered inside Israel since Saturday’s assault.**How has Israel responded?**

In response to the attack, Israel has declared war and launched “Operation Swords of Iron,” striking what it says are Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza. It has also blocked supply lines of basic necessities to the Gaza population, including fuel and water.

Between October 7 and 12, Israel dropped 6,000 bombs on the densely inhabited territory – that’s equivalent to the total number of airstrikes on Gaza during the entire 2014 Gaza-Israel conflict, which lasted 50 days.

Children make up “between 30% and 40% of the wounded” in Israel’s airstrikes on Gaza, British-Palestinian surgeon Ghassan Abu-Sittah told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour on Thursday.

The IDF has told civilians in Gaza to leave their residential areas immediately for their safety, but some say there is nowhere safe to go. All crossings out of Gaza have been shut.

Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant said on Monday that he had ordered a “complete siege” on Gaza, blocking delivery of electricity, food, fuel and water. Energy Minister Israel Katz has said supplies will remain cut off until hostages being held by Hamas are freed.

Israel on Wednesday formed an emergency government and war management cabinet.

On Friday, Israel’s military told the 1.1 million people in northern Gaza to evacuate their homes immediately.

CNN has geolocated and authenticated five videos from the scene of a large explosionalong one of the evacuation routes for civilians south of Gaza City.

The videos show many dead bodies amid a scene of extensive destruction. Some of those bodies are on a flat-bed trailer that appears to have been used to carry people away from Gaza City. They include several children. There are also a number of badly burned and damaged cars.

It’s unclear what caused the widespread devastation; the explosion occurred on Salah al-Deen Street on Friday afternoon.

**What’s the situation in Gaza now?**

A humanitarian crisis in Gaza is rapidly spiraling amid warnings that peosple are at risk of starvation as Israel tightens its chokehold on the territory.

The Gaza Strip is one of most densely populated places on earth, with some 2 million people crammed in 140-square-mile territory. The enclave lies on Egypt’s western border and has been under blockade since Hamas seized control in 2007.

The Israeli air, naval and land blockade on the territory, as well as the Egyptian land blockade, continue today.

The enclave’s only power station stopped working on Wednesday. Hospitals are expected to run out of fuel, leading to “catastrophic” conditions, the Palestinian Health Ministry warned. The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that hospitals are at “breaking point.”

On Thursday, the International Committee of the Red Cross warned hospitals in Gaza “risk turning into morgues” as they lose power. Airstrikes have hit at least 88 education facilities and killed 12 UN personnel, according to the UN.

The Palestine Red Crescent has warned of a “humanitarian catastrophe” as there are “no safe areas” to evacuate civilians to, after Israel told half the population to migrate south. It described the Israeli evacuation call as “shocking and beyond belief.”

Human rights groups have meanwhile warned of possible war crimes being committed by Israel in Gaza. Amnesty International on Friday urged Israel to “immediately” lift its blockade on the enclave, saying the “collective punishment” of civilians for Hamas’ terrorist atrocities amounts to a war crime.

Since Israel shut its two crossings with Gaza, the only corridor through which Palestinians or aid can pass in and out of the territory is the Rafah Crossing, which connects the south of the enclave to Egypt. But it’s unclear whether that crossing is open.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said on Saturday that the crossing is open but aerial bombardment has rendered the roads on the Gaza side “inoperable.”

Aid flights from Jordan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the World Health Organization, and the Red Cross have arrived in Egypt, but the supplies have not yet made it through the crossing. Shoukry said Egypt has tried to ship humanitarian aid to Gaza but has not received the proper authorization to do so.

Hamas said on Friday that 13 Israeli hostages held in Gaza have been killed by “random” Israeli bombings on the enclave over the past 24 hours. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it could not confirm or deny the claim.

Hamas also called on Gazans not to leave their homes, accusing Israel of engaging in “psychological warfare” by sending messages telling Palestinian civilians and employees of international organizations to evacuate to the south. “Displacement and exile are not for us,” Hamas said.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) on Friday said it had relocated its central operations center and international staff in Gaza to the south of the besieged enclave.

**What is Hamas?**

Hamas is an [Islamist organization](https://www.cnn.com/2012/11/16/world/meast/hamas-explainer/index.html) with a military wing that came into being in 1987, emerging out of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist group that was founded in the late 1920s in Egypt.

The group, like most Palestinian factions and political parties, insists that Israel is an occupying power and that it is trying to liberate the Palestinian territories. It considers Israel an illegitimate state and has called for its downfall.

Unlike some other Palestinian factions, Hamas refuses to engage with Israel. In 1993, it opposed the Oslo Accords, a peace pact between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that saw the PLO give up armed resistance against Israel in return for promises of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. The Accords also established the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Hamas presents itself as a[n alternative to the PA,](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/14/middleeast/palestinians-mock-abbas-mime-intl/index.html) which has recognized Israel and has engaged in multiple failed peace initiatives with it. The PA, whose credibility among Palestinians has suffered over the years, is today led by President Mahmoud Abbas.

It has over the years claimed many attacks on Israel and has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union and Israel. Israel accuses its archenemy Iran of backing the group.

Hamas rules Gaza, the small strip of land bordering Israel and Egypt that has changed hands several times over the past 70 years. The vast majority of its population are [descendants of refugees](https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip) who were either expelled or forced to flee their homes in 1948 in what is now Israel.

**How did the two sides get here?**

Tensions between [Israelis and the Palestinians](http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2014/08/world/israel-neighbors/) have existed since before Israel’s [founding in 1948](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/26/middleeast/israel-75th-anniversary-crossroads-mime-intl/index.html). Thousands of people on both sides have been killed and many more injured over decades.

Violence has been particularly acute this year. The number of Palestinians – militants and civilians – killed in the occupied West Bank by Israeli forces since the year began is the highest in nearly two decades. The same is true of Israelis and foreigners – most of them civilians – killed in Palestinian attacks.

Israel captured Gaza from Egypt in the 1967 war, then withdrew its troops and settlers in 2005. The territory, home to some 2 million Palestinians, fell under Hamas’ control in 2007 after a brief civil war with Fatah, a rival Palestinian faction that is the backbone of the Palestinian Authority.

After Hamas seized control, Israel and Egypt imposed a strict siege on the territory, which is ongoing. Israel also maintains an air and naval blockade on Gaza.

Human Rights Watch has called the territory an “open-air prison.” More than half of its population lives in poverty and is [food insecure](https://www.wfp.org/countries/palestine), and nearly 80% of its population [relies on humanitarian assistance.](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/fifteen-years-blockade-gaza-strip)

Hamas and Israel have fought several wars. Before Saturday’s operation, the last war between the two was in 2021, which lasted for 11 days and killed at least 250 people in Gaza and 13 in Israel.

Saturday’s assault occurred 50 years almost to the day since the 1973 war, when Israel’s Arab neighbors launched a surprise attack on Israel on [Yom Kippur](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/24/us/yom-kippur-things-to-know/index.html), the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, on October 6, 1973.

**What happens next?**

Israel is now on a war footing and has amassed more than 300,000 reservists along the Gaza border for a potential ground operation. It has said that it will exact a heavy price on Hamas for its attack and plans to retrieve Israeli hostages from the territory.

Israel has dealt with hostage situations before, but never at this scale. In the past, militants have mostly demanded the release of prisoners held in Israeli jails in exchange for captured Israelis. In 2011, Israel traded 1,027 Palestinians for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, and in 2004, it released more than two dozen Lebanese and Arab prisoners – including two senior Hezbollah officials – for Elhanan Tannenbaum, an Israeli businessman and army reserve colonel, as well as the bodies of three IDF soldiers. In 2008, Israel released five Palestinian prisoners, five Lebanese prisoners and returned the bodies of nearly 200 Arab fighters in exchange for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers.

Hamas has captured at least 150 hostages. Their presence in Gaza will undoubtedly complicate any Israeli military operation there.

The militant group’s armed wing said Monday it would begin killing civilian hostages and broadcasting the act if Israel targets people in Gaza without warning. It isn’t clear if it has acted on those threats yet.

The IDF has said that it plans to take control of the Gaza Strip. Its spokesperson, Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, said the aim is to “end the Gaza enclave” and “control the entire enclave.”

When asked whether it had stopped the “knock on the roof,” which is the Israeli military’s warning for civilians before it bombs a building. Hecht responded that Hamas did not “knock on the roof.”

“When they came in and threw grenades at our ambulances they did not knock on the roof. This is war. The scale is different,” Hecht said.

Senior Hamas member Saleh al-Arouri told Al Jazeera Arabic on Saturday that Hamas is ready “for all options, including a war and an escalation on all levels.”

“We are ready for the worst-case scenario, including a ground invasion, which will be the best for us to decide the ending of this battle,” al-Arouri said.

**Could this lead to a wider regional conflict?**

Hamas’ operation was carried out in a sophisticated and coordinated manner and would have taken a significant amount of planning. Speculation has been rife that the group may have received assistance from abroad, which, if proven, could raise the specter of a wider regional war.

Israel says Iran supports Hamas to the tune of some $100 million dollars a year. The US State Department in 2021 said that the group receives funding, weapons, and training from Iran, as well as some funds that are raised in Gulf Arab countries.

“Of course Iran is in the picture,” one US official told CNN. “They’ve provided support for years to Hamas and Hezbollah.”A senior Biden administration official said on Saturday that it was too early to say whether Iran was directly involved in the attack, but that Washington will be tracking the matter “very closely.”

But President Joe Biden on Wednesday issued a stark warning to Iran to “be careful” around its actions in the region.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi spoke to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh by phone last Sunday and later congratulated the Palestinian people for their “victory” over Israel. On Monday, however, Iran’s mission to the United Nations said the Islamic Republic was “not involved in Palestine’s response,” referring to the Hamas attack. “It is taken solely by Palestine itself,” it said.

On Friday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said in Beirut that “Lebanon’s security is Iran’s security,” in an apparent warning to Israel not to strike Lebanon or the Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group that operates there.

He said that Western officials had asked him if new fronts could open against Israel, adding that it’s “probable” that members of the “resistance” against Israel could enter the war “with the continuation of Israeli war crimes.”

The warning came a day after the Iran-allied Syrian regime said that Israel struck Damascus and Aleppo airports, rendering them non-operational.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has meanwhile been shuttling around the region, visiting Israel, the occupied West Bank and Jordan. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also arrived in Israel on Friday.

The US has ordered t[wo carrier strike groups](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/14/middleeast/us-aircraft-carrier-eisenhower-israel-gaza-intl-hnk-ml/index.html) to the eastern Mediterranean Sea, Austin said on Saturday. A US official told CNN that the US is also sending more fighter jets to the Middle East to deter any Iranian potential aggression or an expansion of the fighting beyond Israel’s borders.

Israel may also face the threat of new fronts opening in the war. Of its immediate neighbors, it is only at peace with Jordan and Egypt, and is officially in a state of war with Lebanon and Syria. Israel has said it is ready in case there are attacks from those two countries.

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, has praised Hamas’ attack and said it is in contact with Palestinian militant groups “at home and abroad,” its Al Manar channel said. The group claimed responsibility for targeting three Israeli sites in an area known as Shebaa Farms using missiles and artillery. The area is considered by Lebanon as Israeli-occupied. Israel responded by firing artillery.

On Monday, the IDF said it killed a “number of armed suspects” who infiltrated into Israel from Lebanon and that soldiers were searching the area. Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati said on Monday that his country doesn’t want to be drawn into the conflict.

The IDF said Wednesday a report was received regarding a suspected “infiltration from Lebanon into Israeli air space.”

It did not provide further details and it was unclear whether the infiltration involved aircraft, drones, gliders, balloons or people.

Even as the US believes Iran is “complicit” in the attack, given its [years of support](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-iran-israel-attack-analysis-intl/index.html) to the Palestinian militant group, national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Tuesday that the administration still does not have direct evidence linking Tehran to the planning and execution of the assault.

“We’re looking to acquire further intelligence,” Sullivan told reporters at the White House. “But as I stand here today, while Iran plays this broad role – sustained, deep and dark role in providing all of this support and capabilities to Hamas – in terms of this particular gruesome attack on October 7, we don’t currently have that information.”

Privately, multiple intelligence, military and congressional officials with access to classified intelligence tell CNN the same thing that Sullivan said publicly: No direct evidence has been found indicating Iran was directly involved.

Waiting to see if we get a smoking gun in the intel,” said one military official.

Israeli intelligence is also going back and examining previous evidence, a senior Israeli official told CNN.

“I doubt that Iran had no knowledge whatsoever,” the official said. “We’ve seen meetings and we’ve seen the close coordination between them.”

US and Israeli intelligence had no advance warning of the attack – something US officials say is stunning given the scale of the assault – and now, the Biden administration is treading cautiously.

**‘Where else would it have come from?’**

Iran has for years been Hamas’ chief benefactor, providing it with tens of millions of dollars, weapons and components smuggled into Gaza, as well as broad technical and ideological support.Hamas maintains a degree of independence from the Iranian regime. Tehran doesn’t have advisers on the ground in blockaded Gaza, according to former security officials and other regional analysts, and it doesn’t command the group’s activities.

But the unprecedented scale of the weekend’s attack – combined with analysts’ broad belief that Iran sees the attack as a net positive for its interests in the region – have fueled questions of whether Hamas could have pulled off such a sophisticated operation without direct Iranian assistance.

We spend a lot of time and resources worrying about what Iran is doing and how to counter what Iran is doing,” a State Department official said. “This certainly opens up a new chapter in that discussion.In 2022, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said publicly that the group had received about $70 million from Iran that year and that it used the money to build rockets. A State Department report from 2020 found that Iran provided about $100 million annually to Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas.

Former US officials say there is little question the massive stockpile of weapons used in Saturday’s attack was acquired and assembled with help from Iran.

“Hamas didn’t build the guidance system and those missiles in Gaza,” said retired Gen. Frank McKenzie, the former commander of US Central Command. “They got them from somewhere. And the technology assistance to put it together certainly came from Iran – where else would it have come from?”

Still, the Biden administration has for days stopped short of attributing a role in the tactical planning and execution of the attack to Tehran, and current and former US intelligence analysts who spoke to CNN cautioned that past Iranian support to the group isn’t enough evidence to prove its direct involvement.

“Even if they didn’t give the instruction, you see it in the support,” said Zohar Palti, the former head of the Political-Military Bureau at Israel’s Ministry of Defense. “Is Hamas a complete Iranian proxy that does everything Iran wants? No. But the relationship is much closer than it was even three years ago.”Tehran has denied any involvement in the attack, even as it has lauded it publicly. Israel has also expressed caution publicly.

“We have no evidence or proof” that Iran was behind the attack, Maj. Nir Dinar, a spokesperson for the Israel Defense Forces, told Politico on Monday. “We are 100 percent sure that the Iranians were not surprised.”

**Disrupting Saudi, Israeli negotiations**

Privately, some US officials believe it’s likely Iran had at least some involvement in the planning of the attack. But those personal assessments are largely based on the belief that Iran would likely look for any opportunity to disrupt the [fragile negotiations](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/22/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-cnn-interview-intl/index.html) that had been in the works to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Saturday’s attack is widely seen as having endangered those talks.

Other analysts say it’s equally likely that Iran would have wanted to maintain its distance from any Hamas operation against Israel — even if it was aware of the attack in advance.

It is not in Iran’s interest to have more direct involvement, said Norm Roule, the former national intelligence manager for Iran at the CIA.

“Iran identifies regional proxies and then provides them with the political, financial and security support to dominate their particular geography,” Roule said. “Iran encourages military operations, but its proxies manage those actions.”

It’s possible that Iran provided some operational and planning support in advance of the attack, but that it told Hamas, “You’re on your own once it happens,” said Mike Knights, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute who specializes in Iran-backed proxy groups.

“This looks like Hamas learned some very significant new tricks from someone else and that may well have been the Iranians,” Knights said. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean that Iran is up for broadening the war.”

**An evolving relationship**

The relationship between Iran and Hamas has evolved over the years. In the early days of the Syrian civil war a decade ago, Hamas and Iran found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict.

For years, the two had a fraught relationship driven by two different Islamist ideologies: Sunni Muslim Hamas and Shia Muslim Iran. But Hamas saw Iran’s influence expanding in the region, especially as America’s shrinking role in the Middle East created a power vacuum for Tehran to exploit, according to Michael Milshtein, the former head of the Department for Palestinian Affairs in the Israeli military’s intelligence directorate.

More recently, Tehran has stepped up the training assistance it provides Hamas inside Iran, according to a former Western defense official. “Iran was being more proactive in logistics and training of these people,” the former official said. “They’ve gone full on in last few years … with explicit desire to destabilize” the region.

According to Knights, the closest relationship that Shia Iran now has with any Sunni group is Hamas. Tehran has “provided Hamas with precision loitering munitions drone systems that it has not even provided the Iraqi militias, (with) which it has had relationships since the 1980s.”

“This suggests a level of actual operational arming, training, equipping that we’ve only previously seen with Lebanese Hezbollah, and then with the Houthis in Yemen,” Knights said.

But Hamas is not a proxy of Iran, Milshtein said. Unlike terror groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza or Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas maintains a large degree of independence from Tehran, even as the assistance has dramatically expanded.

“Hamas became comfortable getting close to Iran,” Milshtein said, but the relationship remains largely based on military cooperation. Hamas received Iranian weapons and military technology, and learned from the Iranians about planning operations. But the power to make a decision remained with Hamas’ leadership.

“Everything we have seen in the last four days, we can’t say it’s an Iranian plan or an Iranian effort,” Milshtein said. “It’s a Hamas plan that got Iranian help.”

**Searching for a motivation**

US intelligence officials are also working to understand Hamas’ immediate motivation for launching the attack. Unlike the Palestinian Authority, the militant group does not recognize Israel and is committed to the destruction of the Jewish state.

Broadly, the more than 2 million residents of the Gaza Strip live in crowded and substandard conditions, partly as a result of a yearslong Israeli blockade and recurring airstrikes on the densely populated enclave.

McKenzie and others said Hamas was likely motivated by its own parochial cause more than it was by any interest in disrupting normalization talks.

“I think the Hamas calculation is very little on normalization,” McKenzie said. “I think it’s less the larger geostrategic things in the theater.

“It’s the Hamas-Israeli relationship, not the larger, ‘What does this mean to Saudi Arabia?

Get down!” the medic in the front seat hissed as our ambulance approached the Israeli checkpoint.I could see through the front window tanks by the side of the road, nervous Israeli soldiers raising their guns as we approached.

This was January 2009 and the CNN crew had caught a ride with a convoy of ambulances going from Rafah in the southern [Gaza Strip](https://cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-war-explained-mime-intl/index.html) toward Gaza City along the coastal road. The medics allowed us to come along on the condition we hid on their stretchers.

This was what Israel had dubbed [“Operation Cast Lead,”](https://cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/01/29/israel.gaza.report/index.html) the first in a series of flare-ups of various durations between Israel and Gaza in 2012, 2014, 2021 and 2022. The ongoing operation in Gaza was preceded by another one this May.

After a brief exchange with the medics in the lead ambulance, the soldiers waved us through without inspecting the ambulances.

It was the deepest Israeli ground operation into Gaza since the withdrawal from the Strip in 2005. Then, Israeli troops largely avoided the most built up and crowded areas, particularly Gaza’s eight crammed refugee camps. They were well aware that entering into the narrow alleys of camps like al-Shati, one of the most crowded, would be risky. Their focus was on controlling the periphery of urban areas.

Israel’s tactics have always been to move fast, control as much territory as possible, but avoid street-to-street, house-to-house fighting where a weaker opponent can take full advantage of the terrain. Entering urban areas in Gaza, however, would bring in an entire new element to the fight.

At the moment Israeli forces are engaged with [Hamas](https://cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-attack-strategy-israel-mime-intl/index.html). But Gaza is home to a myriad of armed Palestinian groups, including Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) to name just a few. They don’t have Hamas’ manpower or weaponry, but they’re numerous enough to put up serious resistance.

In March 2008, I went to Gaza to cover an Israeli incursion into the north, this time dubbed “Hot Winter,” yet another attempt to stop rocket fire from Gaza. At the time, Hamas was in full control of the Gaza Strip, having expelled the rival Fatah faction the previous year. But when I arrived in the area where Israeli forces were trying to advance, it wasn’t Hamas fighters but rather gunmen from the PFLP who were running street battles with Israeli troops. They ducked in and out of alleyways, sprinted across streets with rocket propelled grenade launchers and Kalashinkov assault rifles. The young men were almost giddy with excitement. They finally had a chance to fight Israeli troops on their own ground. Eventually, the Israelis pulled out. The rocket fire continued.

Going back to the summer of 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon in pursuit of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Israeli forces made it all the way to Beirut then stopped on the outskirts, establishing a siege much along the lines announced Monday by Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. It was clear even back then that entering Beirut, particularly the Palestinian refugee camps, would be a deadly mission for all.

During the siege that followed, Israeli warplanes and artillery pummeled West Beirut, but ground troops stayed out of Beirut proper.

In the end, under American pressure, a deal was worked out whereby Palestinian fighters would evacuate Beirut and Lebanon to Yemen, Tunisia and elsewhere. It was only after they left that Israeli troops took control of the western part of the city. Soon afterwards in September 1982, with Israel in control of West Beirut, the Israeli military, under the leadership of then Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, allowed their right-wing Christian Lebanese allies, the Kataib, to enter Sabra and Shatila refugee camp and slaughter over a thousand civilians who no longer were able to defend themselves because the men of fighting age and their weapons had left as part of the US-brokered deal with the PLO.

The [Israeli military has now mobilized](https://cnn.com/2023/10/10/middleeast/israel-gaza-siege-hamas-tuesday-intl-hnk/index.html) 300,000 reservists for what is now widely believed to be an unprecedented incursion into Gaza – and perhaps, some speculate, a re-occupation of the enclave – in the aftermath of Hamas’ October 7 surprise attack, which killed more than 1,300 people in Israel.What awaits it is a Hamas that has shown, despite the cruelty vividly displayed in its Saturday attack, a level of military capability far beyond what was previously thought. It is probably well prepared for the next phase in this war.

Over the past week, Israel has launched hundreds of punishing strikes on Gaza, turning some areas into wastelands of shattered concrete and twisted metal. In the process, over 2,200 Palestinians – including many civilians and over 700 children – have been killed. And this is just the initial phase of this war.

If it comes, the ground operation will be far bloodier and more destructive. Israeli forces will also have to be mindful that spread around Gaza are more than a hundred captive Israelis – soldiers and civilians, including women and children – held hostage by Hamas. And although no one outside Hamas knows where they’re being held, it’s likely they’re in the most difficult areas for Israeli forces to access, possibly in crowded refugee camps.

As eager as Israel’s leaders may be to deal a fatal blow to Hamas, it will come at a very high price. To all. Three months ago, speaking to citizens rocked by a [horrific day of attacks](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-intelligence-intl/index.html) by Hamas, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a promise.“The IDF will immediately use all its strength to destroy Hamas’s capabilities,” Netanyahu said. “We will destroy them.”

Now, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is shifting to [a new phase](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/05/middleeast/israel-government-divisions-gaza-plan-intl/index.html) of its war on Hamas in Gaza – and there are signs its objectives are changing too.

“The record is not very friendly to military campaigns seeking to eradicate political military movement that are deeply rooted,” Bilal Y. Saab, an associate fellow in the Middle East and North Africa at Chatham House, told CNN.

“IDF leadership understands very well that the most they can do is severely degrade the military capabilities of Hamas,” Saab said.

Israel has seen some successes in that regard; its forces claim to have killed thousands of Hamas fighters, including some high-ranking members, and have dismantled some parts of the group’s vast tunnel network under the enclave.

But challenges remain and an endgame is far from sight. Few countries at war set deadlines. Israeli officials have warned of a lengthy war that could stretch through the entirety of 2024 and beyond. It will unfold in front of an international community that is increasingly aghast at the extraordinary humanitarian crisis and spiraling civilian deaths in Gaza.

And as international pressure increases, so too could domestic unease towards Netanyahu – an embattled prime minister eager to point to tangible victories.

“There is a race against time,” said Saab, outlining the key questions facing Israel’s leadership. “At what price is this tactical success going to come, and how much time do the Israelis have to achieve that tactical success without suffering from more significant international outrage?”

**A ‘new combat approach’**

The destruction of Hamas – the goal that Netanyahu touted on October 7 – was lofty, elusive and, according to many analysts, impossible.

“This kind of mission cannot be completed – we’ve seen it fail over the years many times,” Saab said.

Hamas’ influence extends far beyond Gaza, meaning a total defeat of the group is at least highly ambitious for Israel, if it can be achieved at all.

In a speech marking the anniversary of the attacks, Netanyahu reiterated his goals for the conflict: “To eliminate Hamas, return our hostages and ensure that Gaza will no longer be a threat to Israel.”

But it remains unclear whether IDF leadership places eliminating Hamas atop its priorities. IDF intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva left out the destruction of Hamas when listing military goals in a speech on Thursday, [Israeli media noted.](https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-780726)

And also on Thursday, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant unveiled plans for the next phase of the war in Gaza, emphasizing a new combat approach in the north and a sustained focus on targeting Hamas leaders suspected to be present in the enclave’s southern territory.In the third phase, IDF operations in northern Gaza will encompass “raids, the destruction of terror tunnels, aerial and ground activities, and special operations,” according to Gallant.

“This phase will be less intense, but it will take more time,” Yohanan Plesner, the President of the Israel Democracy Institute and a former Knesset member for the Kadima party, told CNN.

If the more realistic target is a severe reduction in Hamas’ fighting capabilities, many analysts say that tangible progress has been made in the past three months.

“The definition of success will not be to catch or kill all Hamas operatives, but to ensure that Hamas can no longer effectively govern the Gaza Strip,” Plesner said. “Hamas is organized like an army, with command and control centers, regiments and brigades. This command structure is being seriously challenged and dismantled.”

Addressing reporters in Tel Aviv, Netanyahu said last week that the Israeli military is “fighting with force and new systems above and below the ground” and claimed to have [killed 8,000 Hamas fighters](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-31-23/h_20f49090048c65d36986cd473850ec5e) in Gaza, according to Army Radio.

CNN can’t verify this figure. The Hamas-run Health Ministry in Gaza says nearly 23,000 people have been killed in the territory since the war began. The ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants, but both the ministry in Gaza and its counterpart in the occupied West Bank suggest that approximately 70% of those killed or injured are women and children.

Israel believed Hamas had about 30,000 fighters in Gaza before the war began on October 7, the Israel Defense Forces [told CNN in December.](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-10-23/h_403d0f55740b5d165adc6416cf5be5cf) The fighters were divided into five brigades, 24 battalions and approximately 140 companies, the IDF told CNN, each with capabilities including anti-tank missiles, snipers and engineers, and rocket and mortar arrays.

**A hunt for Hamas’ leaders**

Israel has also claimed some success in targeting Hamas’ tunnel shafts, a complex notoriously difficult for IDF troops to infiltrate. The IDF released a video this week which it says showed the dismantlement of one tunnel route under Al-Shifa Hospital, the largest medical complex in Gaza, that it accused Hamas of excavating.

Last month, it released other videos it said showed a network of tunnels which connect to residences and offices of senior Hamas leadership including Ismail Haniyeh, Yahya Sinwar, and Muhammad Deif.

But the bigger goal of finding and killing Hamas’ most important leaders in Gaza has eluded Israel to date.

“This is where intelligence is king,” Saab said. Gallant and other officials have repeatedly emphasized the importance of their efforts to eliminate senior Hamas commanders, with the defense minister vowing in late December that Sinwar would “meet the barrels of our guns soon.”

A longtime figure in the Islamist Palestinian group, Sinwar was responsible for building up Hamas’ military wing before forging important new ties with regional Arab powers as the group’s civilian and political leader. “Organizations like these replace commanders pretty easily. I don’t think anyone is irreplaceable in Hamas,” Saab said. “But if you take out the symbolic heads of the organization, who knows if that might have a trickle down effect, especially with people who have military responsibilities.”

It seems unlikely that the new phase of Israel’s war will bring relief for the Palestinians trapped in Gaza, where a humanitarian crisis has spiraled to extraordinary levels.

But Netanyahu may be more likely to be bow in the face of [domestic pressure](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/05/opinions/netanyahu-political-future-ghitis/index.html), which has been rising in particular over the continued captivity of more than 100 hostages taken by Hamas on October 7.

Israel believes 25 hostages are dead and still being held by in Gaza, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office told CNN Friday. It leaves 107 hostages from the Hamas attack last year still thought to be alive.

The return of those hostages remains a goal in the war’s new phase, but failure to deliver would intensify political pressure on a decisive leader whose popularity among Israelis has only plunged since October 7.

“From day one, there was a clear disparity – there is support for the war goals and for the IDF, (but) the trust in the Israeli government is at an all-time low,” Plesner said, “There’s a huge gulf.”

Anxiety mounts every day that a full-scale Middle East war could erupt from the flames of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.“We feel and we’re afraid of it,” Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib [told](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2024/01/04/exp-lebanon-israel-gaza-war-intv-fst-010301pseg1-cnni-world.cnn) CNN’s Christiane Amanpour this week. “We don’t want any escalation in the war. … We don’t like a regional war because it’s dangerous to everybody. Dangerous to Lebanon, dangerous to Israel and to the countries surrounding Israel,” he said, adding, “A regional war is bad for everybody.”

But the one thing that could avert such a disaster is that a more expansive conflict may not be in the vital national interests of any of the region’s major powers.

And while key states and extremist groups appear to be walking right up to the brink, there’s still hope that the economic, political and military consequences of an escalation will be so grave, that they will stop just short of escalation.

Almost every day brings another violent incident. On Thursday, for instance, [the US carried out a strike](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/04/politics/us-targeted-iranian-proxy-group-baghdad-strike/index.html) in Baghdad that killed a leader from an Iran-backed militia that Washington blames for attacks against US personnel in the region. US troops in Iraq and Syria tasked with keeping a lid on ISIS have repeatedly come under rocket and drone attacks from Tehran’s proxies.

Fighting is intensifying between Israel and another pro-Iranian group, Hezbollah, across the Lebanon border. In another alarming sign, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on Thursday told US envoy Amos Hochstein that time was running out to create a “new reality” on Israel’s northern border to allow residents there to return to their homes. Israel is, meanwhile, suspected of carrying out an attack on high-ranking Hamas leader, Saleh Al-Arouri, in Beirut, sparking fury among Hezbollah leaders who control the area where he was killed.

In another alarming incident, US forces this week [sank three boats](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/31/politics/us-helicopters-sink-kill-houthis-red-sea/index.html) belonging to Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, following a series of attacks on commercial shipping. Central Command said American helicopters were fired on first and acted in self-defense. The US and around a dozen allies have launched a maritime task force to protect commercial vessels in critical sea lanes in the area after some shipping firms sent their vessels on a longer, less economical route around Africa.

A double bomb attack this week near the grave of former Iranian intelligence chief [Qasem Soleimani](https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/03/asia/soleimani-profile-intl-hnk/index.html), since claimed by ISIS, meanwhile rocked an already tense region and may increase internal pressure on Iran’s government as it plots its wider moves in the Middle East.

**Why a wider war could be avoided**

Many of the region’s power brokers – including Israel, Iran and Hezbollah – may have the most interest in a high-level of tension stopping just short of war. The worry for the US, however, is that all of this playing with fire could spark another Middle Eastern conflict that could drag in Americans. That’s a scenario the Biden administration is desperate to avoid — especially in an election year.

“There are no strategic drivers, (for) the main regional or external actors to ignite a regional war, if only because the goals of such conflict would be unclear, and this would immediately disrupt their significant political and economic stability,” Norman Roule, former US national intelligence manager for Iran, told CNN’s Jake Tapper on Wednesday. “At the same time, Iran and its proxies have multiple incentives to maintain and even increase the intensity and frequency of the current actions against Israel.

“The concern should be that any of these activities produces an event that requires retaliation or involvement by other actors that then build on each other, leading to the very conventional conflict we all wish to avoid.”

The situation is so treacherous because rapid deterioration could happen at any moment on any number of fronts. Hezbollah has thousands of missiles that could targetIsraeli civilians, meaning that intensified clashes could quickly get very dangerous. A mass casualty attack by Iranian proxies against US forces would create political and military imperatives for President Joe Biden to take far more robust military action than he has so far. If a US or allied ship in the Red Sea sustains serious damage, Biden would face similar choices. And the entry into the Red Sea this week of an Iranian destroyer raised the possibility of miscalculations with rival navies operating in close quarters in fraught waters.

The scale and barbarity of the Hamas operation and Israel’s response, which has pulverized vast areas of civilian neighborhoods in Gaza, set off a cascade of events embedded in the fault lines of the Middle East. The subsequent shockwaves ended a period of relative calm in the region, during which the Trump and Biden administrations, and its allies, had tried to forge closer links between Gulf States and Israel. The ensuing tensions appear to have ended hopes in the White House for any tacit and informal lowering of antagonism with Iran, although Biden’s political foes accuse him of being insufficiently tough on the Islamic Republic and its nuclear program.

**A geopolitical circuit breaker?**

The key players’ interest in avoiding conflict could act as a circuit breaker. Given the likely cost of a regional war and the global economic, military and political repercussions it would spark, each power has good reasons to avoid the brink:

**Israel** is already embroiled in a hot war in Gaza that its government says will drag on for months. A full-scale war with Hezbollah could subject Israeli citizens to bombardments potentially far greater than those suffered by Israeli cities from Hamas rocket attacks last year. In that sense, the strike against Arouri – which Israel was behind, a US official confirmed to CNN on Wednesday – may have been a gamble that it would not spark a massive response from Hezbollah. At the same time, however, as the rest of the world frets about a widening conflict, Israeli leaders believe they are already embroiled in what is effectively a regional war given the multi-front threats they face.

**The United States** is intensifying a strategy it has been employing for weeks — to try to stop things spilling out of control. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is headed to the region again, facing increasing pressure to cool tensions between Israel and Hezbollah in a situation that has Lebanon, which Hezbollah dominates, fearing a catastrophe that could worsen its already fragile political, economic and humanitarian plight. American forces – in Syria, Iraq, and at sea – look painfully exposed. Regarding Iranian proxies, the Biden administration appears to be seeking to reestablish a level of deterrence without itself setting off the regional tinder box.

Washington and its allies also just issued a statement warning Houthi rebels in Yemen of consequences if attacks on shipping continue in the Red Sea, a sea lane that is vital to the global economy. CNN’s Natasha Bertrand and Kevin Liptak reported on Thursday that the White House’s patience is close to running out with the rebels. But direct strikes against their launch sites on land would not only drag allied forces deeper into the conflict, they could threaten a truce that paused Yemen’s murderous civil war. Biden is in a political bind. He’s constantly accused by Republicans of being too soft on Iran and its proxies. But any worsening of the regional situation also could play into GOP claims that the 81-year-old Democratic president lacks the capacity to lead. The danger for Biden is that the last 20 years are filled with repeated US failures to impose its will on the Middle East. Asserting US power is easier said than done.

**Iran** may have more to gain from using its sprawling network of proxy groups to exert lower-level costs on Israel and the United States than it would from plunging into a direct conflict. The latter could prove militarily and economically destabilizing and increase political pressure toward the clerical regime, which is already soaring after the bomb attacks. But there’s also a danger that such political heat could force the hand of leaders who may see a more aggressive posture abroad as likely to ease difficulties at home. Only 15 months ago, Iran’s clerics were facing [a wave of anti-government protests](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/17/middleeast/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-anniversary-intl-hnk/index.html) sparked by the death of a woman in the custody of the country’s feared morality police.

Vali Nasr, a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, told CNN’s Becky Anderson on Wednesday he was very worried about current tensions. But he added: “I don’t think the Iranians want an expanded conflict,” while making the point that some in Iran believed that Israel was trying to bait Iran into direct clashes. “I think the calculation, at least among Iranians, Hezbollah, maybe other governments in the region, not necessarily Israel, is that the United States does not want a bigger war. President Biden doesn’t want a bigger war,” Nasr said.

That said, these calculations could change if Washington is unable to deter Israel from expanding the conflict. The attack on the Hamas leader in Beirut, which the US said it didn’t know about beforehand, therefore looks like a risky move by Benjamin Netanyahu’s government. It risks worsening increasingly dicey relations with the US, after White House calls for an easing of intensity of the Gaza operation, that have been repeatedly rebuffed.

**Hezbollah** is the most powerful political player in Lebanon. It is effectively an extension of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. While it has a massive arsenal of rockets aimed at Israel, its power could be significantly diminished in the event of a full-scale war. A degraded Hezbollah would mean a significant ebbing of Iran’s regional influence. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned on Wednesday that the killing of Arouri, the Hamas leader, wouldn’t go unpunished and that if Israel wages war in Lebanon, the response would be “limitless.”

But Bou Habib, the Lebanese foreign minister, told CNN he believed the militia group would stop short of increasing the intensity of the war with Israel. “We have a lot of reasons to think that this would not happen, that they – (and) we – do not want, as Lebanese, all of us, we do not want any war,” he said. “It’s not like we can order them. We’re not claiming that, but we can convince them. And I think it is working in this direction.”

Rifts in the Israeli government emerged publicly on Friday as members of the cabinet argued over plans for the [post-war future of Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-04-24/h_2c1e8930d8ebeacab6c418b8ae1095ad) and how to handle investigations into the security failings around Hamas’ October 7 attacks.

The public sniping followed what one source described as a “fight” at a meeting of the the security cabinet on Thursday. Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said there had been a “stormy discussion,” while former Defense Minister Benny Gantz said a “politically motivated attack” had been launched.

The developments illustrate the fault lines emerging in the governing coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after three months of war with Hamas. If the government collapses, Israel would likely face new elections that Netanyahu is widely expected to lose.

Thursday’s security cabinet split was over how to handle investigations into the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, including the Israeli military’s failure to foresee it, as well as how to prosecute the war from now on.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant outlined plans for the next phase of the war in Gaza, and provided details of what might follow that, in a three-page document entitled the “Day After.”

He described a “new combat approach” with a sustained focus on targeting Hamas leaders in southern parts of the strip. In northern Gaza, he said the Israel Defense Forces’ (IDF) campaign would encompass “raids, the destruction of terror tunnels, aerial and ground activities, and special operations.”

After the war, the Israeli military would maintain “operational freedom of action in the Gaza Strip” and Israel would continue to “carry out the inspection of goods entering” the territory.

Gallant, a member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s center-right Likud party, said that once the goals of the war have been achieved there would be “no Israeli civilian presence in the Gaza Strip,” appearing to rule out the re-establishment of Israeli settlements in Gaza that Israel unilaterally removed in 2005.

The defense minister also unveiled the concept of a US-led multinational task force charged with “the rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip

But the minister’s plan provided scant detail on the future governance of the enclave, merely saying that the Palestinian “entity controlling the territory” would “build on the capabilities” of “local non-hostile actors” already present in Gaza.

The plan prompted a fiery discussion, according to a source. After a break in the meeting, the source said, Transportation Minister Miri Regev went on the attack. “After the break Miri Regev came back and launched this fight that was leaked,” said the official, who asked not to be named discussing internal political discussions.

Regev, who is also a member of Likud, did not respond to a CNN request for comment.

Gantz, who joined the government from opposition after October 7, said: “What happened yesterday was a politically motivated attack in the middle of a war. I participated in many cabinet meetings – such conduct has never occurred and must not occur.”

He did not say who had launched the attack, but he criticized Netanyahu. “The cabinet should have discussed strategic processes that will affect the continuation of the campaign and our security in the future. It did not happen, and the prime minister is responsible for that,” Gantz said, urging Netanyahu to choose between unity and security on the one hand and politics on the other.

Netanyahu’s Likud party then lashed out at Gantz. “During a war, when the people are united, Gantz is expected to act responsibly and stop looking for excuses to break his promise to remain in the unity government until the end of the war,” it said in a statement.

Gantz is widely considered a likely successor to Netanyahu when an election is called.

**Tensions spill out in public**

Gallant’s plan was criticized Friday by Smotrich, who along with far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir has advocated for resettling Gazans outside the enclave. Their comments have drawn condemnation from the United States, United Nations officials and several Arab states.

Smotrich wrote on Facebook that “‘The Day After’ is a rerun of ‘The Day Before’ on October 7,” referring to the date of the Hamas terror attack in which 1,200 people were killed and more than 200 taken hostage.

“The solution in Gaza requires thinking outside the box and changing the concept by encouraging voluntary migration and full security control including the renewal of settlement,” Smotrich added.

Israel’s deadly bombardment and besiegement of Gaza has turned swathes of the Palestinian enclave into a wasteland, leaving more than 2.2 million people at risk of severe dehydration, starvation and disease. At least 1.93 million Palestinians have been displaced, according [to the United Nations](https://palestine.un.org/en/257058-everyone-hungry-gaza-warn-un-humanitarians).

Regional actors in the Middle East have repeatedly likened the [mass movement](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/middleeast/queen-rania-jordan-amanpour-interview-intl/index.html) of Palestinians in Gaza to the [“Nakba,”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/08/world/palestinians-fleeing-south-gaza-city-unbearable-situation/index.html) or catastrophe, the Arabic term for the expulsion or flight of Palestinians from their towns during the founding of Israel in 1948.

Since October 7, Israeli attacks on Gaza have killed at least 22,600 people, 70% of whom are women and children, the Haman-run health ministry said on Friday.

**International criticism**

Smotrich previously said the removal of Gazans from the strip could pave the way for Israelis to “make the desert bloom” while Ben Gvir had suggested that the current war represented an “opportunity to concentrate on encouraging the migration of the residents of Gaza.”

Smotrich, a Jewish nationalist, [has denied](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/21/middleeast/israel-smotrich-palestinians-intl/index.html) the existence of a Palestinian people or nationhood. Ben Gvir was previously convicted of [inciting racism](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/11/03/israel-netanyahu-far-right-itamar-ben-gvir-lead-vpx.cnn) against Arabs and supporting a terrorist organization.

Earlier this week, State Department spokesperson Matt Miller roundly condemned the [“inflammatory and irresponsible”](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-03-24/h_9cbe121a02f68707e447034f9c48a000) comments made by Smotrich and Ben Gvir, saying the US had been “told repeatedly and consistently” by Israel “that such statements do not reflect the policy of the Israeli government.

Responding to the US statement, Ben Gvir on Tuesday called the US a “good friend” but said the “emigration of hundreds of thousands from Gaza” would allow Israeli settlers to return and “live in security.”

Smotrich also responded to the US State Department’s rebuke, posting on X: “More than 70% of the Israeli public today supports a humanitarian solution of encouraging the voluntary immigration of Gaza Arabs and their absorption in other countries.”

Other foreign officials, from Europe to Saudi Arabia, have fiercely condemned the rhetoric pushed by Israeli far-right cabinet ministers, while a UN official warned the forced displacement of Palestinians outside Gaza “is an act of genocide.”

“Forcible transfer of Gazan population is an act of genocide especially given the high number of children,” Balakrishnan Rajagopal, the UN’s special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, [posted on X](https://x.com/adequatehousing/status/1742550941147021351?s=20) on Friday.

Gaza is Palestinian and its future is not up to Israel to decide, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna told CNN’s Isa Soares on Friday. “It’s not up to Israel to determine the future of Gaza, which is Palestinian land; we need to return to the principle of international law and respect it.”

On Thursday, the UN’s human rights chief Volker Turk [said](https://x.com/UNHumanRights/status/1742863747683668418?s=20) he was “very disturbed by high-level Israeli officials’ statements on plans to transfer civilians from Gaza to third countries.”

The EU’s foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said [on Wednesday](https://x.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1742622650919170430?s=20), “Forced displacements are strictly prohibited as a grave violation of IHL (International Humanitarian Law) & words matter.”

US officials have previously said they ultimately envision both Gaza and the occupied West Bank being ruled by a unified government led by a “revitalized” Palestinian Authority. At present, the Palestinian Authority exercises limited self-rule in the West Bank, having lost control of the Gaza Strip to Hamas in 2007.

An Arab delegation comprising officials from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority emphasized in a meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in December that Arab states will need assurances that there is a path toward a Palestinian state if they are going are to play a role in the reconstruction of Gaza.

Israel and Hamas are at war, after the Palestinian militant group launched surprise cross-border raids from Gaza on October 7, killing more than 1,400 people and taking hostages.

In response, Israel has been pounding the territory, strikes which Palestinian authorities say have killed more than 5,000 people. Many in the already cramped and impoverished territory are in dire need of aid.

And with Israeli widely expected to launch a ground offensive, there are fears the crisis could escalate further, drawing in Israel’s neighbors.

**What happened?**

[Militants from Gaza](https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-16-23/index.html) fired thousands of rockets towards Israeli towns on October 7, before breaking through the heavily fortified border fence with Israel and sending militants deep into Israeli territory. There, Hamas gunmen killed more than 1,400  people, including civilians and soldiers, and took more than 200 hostages, according to Israeli authorities, in what has been described as the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. The attacks were [unprecedented in tactics and scale](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/hamas-training-site-gaza-israel-intl/index.html) as Israel has not faced its adversaries in street battles on its own territory since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. It has also never faced a terror attack of this magnitude that has taken the lives of so many civilians. While Hamas has kidnapped Israelis before, it has never before taken dozens of hostages at once, including children and the elderly.

Hamas called the operation [“Al-Aqsa Storm”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/05/middleeast/israel-al-aqsa-mosque-clash-intl-hnk/index.html) and said that it was a response to what it described as Israeli attacks on women, the desecration of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and the ongoing siege of Gaza.

**How has Israel responded?**

Following the attack, Israel declared war and launched “Operation Swords of Iron,” striking what it says are Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza. It also blocked supply lines of basic necessities to the Gaza population, including fuel and water.

Israel says it will exact a heavy price on Hamas for its attack and has amassed more than 300,000 reservists along the Gaza border for a potential ground operation.

The IDF has told more than 1 million residents of northern Gaza to evacuate south, according to the United Nations, but some say there is nowhere safe to go, and crossings out of Gaza have been shut. Hamas has called on Gazans not to leave their homes, accusing Israel of engaging in “psychological warfare” by calling on Palestinians to evacuate to the south.

Complicating Israel’s response are the hostages that Hamas is holding. The group has claimed that a number of hostages have been killed by Israeli bombings on the enclave. Israel hasn’t confirmed or denied the claim.

Four hostages [have been released](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/middleeast/israel-hostages-freed-lifshitz-cooper-intl-hnk/index.html) by Hamas in recent days but Israeli officials have estimated that more than 200 people are still missing.

**What’s the situation in Gaza now?**

As the death toll from Israeli airstrikes mounts, a humanitarian crisis [is rapidly spiraling](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/14/middleeast/gaza-evacuation-deadline-israel-intl/index.html) amid warnings that people are at risk of starvation as Israel tightens its chokehold on the territory.

The Gaza Strip is one of most densely populated places on earth, with some 2 million people crammed in 140-square-mile territory. The enclave lies on Egypt’s western border and has been under blockade since Hamas seized control in 2007.

The Israeli air, naval and land blockade on the territory, as well as the Egyptian land blockade, continue today.

The enclave’s only power station stopped working. Hospitals are expected to run out of fuel, with the International Committee of the Red Cross warning that they “risk turning into morgues” as they lose power.

Human rights groups have warned of possible war crimes being committed in Gaza. Amnesty International has urged Israel to “immediately” lift its blockade on the enclave, saying the “[collective punishment](https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-14-23/h_3cfa20dfc2c9531d0909724dabc54d44)” of civilians for Hamas’ terrorism amounts to a war crime.

Since Israel shut its two crossings with Gaza, the only corridor through which Palestinians or aid can pass in and out of the territory is the Rafah crossing, which connects the south of the enclave to Egypt. A tiny trickle of aid has been allowed through but otherwise the crossing has remained shut.

**What is Hamas?**

Hamas is an [Islamist organization](https://www.cnn.com/2012/11/16/world/meast/hamas-explainer/index.html)with a military wing that emerged in 1987 out of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist group that was founded in the late 1920s in Egypt.

The group, like most Palestinian factions and political parties, insists that Israel is an occupying power and that it is trying to liberate the Palestinian territories. It considers Israel an illegitimate state and has called for its downfall.

Unlike some other Palestinian factions, Hamas refuses to engage with Israel. In 1993, it opposed the Oslo Accords, a peace pact between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that saw the PLO give up armed resistance against Israel in return for promises of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. The Accords also established the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Hamas presents itself as an alternative to the PA, which has recognized Israel and has engaged in multiple failed peace initiatives with it. The PA, whose credibility among Palestinians has suffered over the years, is today led by President Mahmoud Abbas.

It has over the years claimed many attacks on Israel and has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union and Israel. Parts of the south are becoming even more crowded and overstretched, Gazans say, as waves of Palestinians abandon their homes in the wake of Israel’s statement, which came ahead of an anticipated ground assault by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).

More than half of Gaza’s 2 million residents live in the northern section that Israel said should evacuate. Many families, some of whom were already internally displaced, are now crammed into an even smaller portion of the 140-square-mile territory.

The IDF said Saturday it would allow safe movement on specified streets between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. local time (3 - 9 a.m. ET). Residents were advised to use this window to move from the northern Beit Hanoun to Khan Yunis in the south – a roughly 20-mile distance of rubble-strewn streets.The evacuation statement has been described by rights groups as well as some neighboring countries as a breach of international humanitarian law. Jordan’s foreign minister described it as [a “war crime.”](https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-14-23/h_3cfa20dfc2c9531d0909724dabc54d44)The UN’s Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which was forced to move its central operations from Gaza City to a location in southern Gaza following the Israeli statement, on Saturday described the [evacuation as an “exodus,”](https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/matter-life-and-death-water-runs-out-2-million-people-gaza) and said that “nearly 1 million people have been displaced in one week alone.”

The evacuation advisory came after Israel imposed a complete siege on Gaza in response to [a brutal attack](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/09/us/us-victims-israel-gaza/index.html) launched a week ago by Hamas, which left at least 1,300 dead in Israel.

At least 2,215 civilians, including 724 children and 458 women, have been killed in Gaza, according to the Palestinian health ministry, as the Israeli military continues to pound the territory.

**‘Food may last us a day or two’**

Palestinians who fled south, and those who are still north, are rapidly running out of food and water. There is no more electricity, and those with fuel-powered generators will soon live in complete blackout. Internet access, through which residents communicate their plight to the world, is also shrinking.

Mohamed Hamed, a 36-year-old resident of Gaza City, moved southward to Nuseirat, a refugee camp some five kilometers north-east of Deir al-Balah – which he was told was safe.

Hamed fled the north with 30 family members, including his extended relatives, four children and his wife, who is over eight months pregnant.

“In this situation, we’re afraid that she goes into labor, and we wouldn’t know where to go,” he told CNN.

The family has no access to medical care and are crammed into a single apartment with no electricity, and quickly depleting food and water.

“There is no electricity, there is no water. Bakeries are working but these are their final hours, as the fuel they need is running out,” he said, adding that “the food we have may last us a day or two.”

Speaking to CNN by phone, Hamed said that Nuseirat is a small area yet has received large crowds of displaced Palestinians from the north. Drinking water is only available in mineral water bottles, he said, which are dwindling as crowds rush to stock up.

Shelling in Nuseirat is intense, but not as bad as it was in Gaza City, where neighborhoods were “entirely wiped out,” he said.

Hamed said that the time provided by the IDF for “safe passage” southward may not be enough for vast number of Palestinians that need to flee, and that some Gazans in the north refuse to leave fearing forceful displacement into Egypt.

For many, that would mean displacement for the second time. The majority of Gaza’s residents today are already refugees from areas that fell under Israeli control in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

“People are afraid of this, of being pushed to Egypt,” he said, adding that the airstrikes have been “horrifying,” with some areas being targeted for the first time despite the years of conflict between Hamas and Israel.

**‘Streets are filled with rubble, reek of blood’**

But not everyone in Gaza’s north has heeded the IDF’s call to move southwards. Palestinian journalist Hashem Al-Saudi and his family have only moved from east to west of Gaza City, which is among areas the IDF told civilians to evacuate.

Residents are forced to leave their homes to fill up water tanks, the 33-year-old told CNN by phone, which puts them at risk of being struck by Israeli missiles.

Food is scarce, he said, and may not last his 11-member family more than three or four days.

“I say this jokingly, but those who are on a diet are eating more than us.”

Al-Saudi says that not only do they have nowhere to stay if they moved south, but that the route itself is unsafe. “Even those who moved south were hit by airstrikes,” he told CNN.

“Nowhere is safe in the Gaza Strip, from Rafah (south) to Beit Hanoun in the north,” Al-Saudi said, adding that everywhere is targeted, including “homes, shelters hospitals and places of worship.”

“Everyone on this piece of land is targeted by the Israeli military, which from the start did not differentiate between civilian and soldier.”

[CNN has geolocated and authenticated](https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-14-23/h_bfac4f076809b2dbddbfbd8f8751ce6a) five videos from the scene of a large explosion Friday along a route for civilians south of Gaza City that Israel said the following day would be safe.

The videos show many dead bodies amid a scene of extensive destruction. Some of those bodies are on a flatbed trailer that appears to have been used to carry people away from Gaza City. They include at least several children. There are also many badly burned and damaged cars.

It’s unclear what caused the widespread devastation; the explosion occurred on Salah Al-Deen street on Friday afternoon. CNN has reached out to IDF for comment on any airstrikes in the same location.

“The situation is much worse than what you see on television,” he said. Many bodies remain unidentified, and corpses are being stored in refrigerators not made for storing human remains, Al-Saudi said.

“Streets are filled with rubble and reek of blood.”

**‘Bracing for the worst’**

The Israeli government launched a complete blockade on essential goods entering Gaza earlier this week, prompting warnings from human rights groups who say the siege is in violation of international law.

Israel, which administers most of the electricity, water, fuel and some of the food inside the Palestinian enclave, already imposes a stringent land, sea and air blockade, but used to permit some trade and humanitarian aid through two crossings that it controls.

Refaat Alareer, 44, a literature professor in Gaza City, said Thursday – before Israel told Gazans to evacuate – the shelves in his local supermarket are emptying every day. He has been able to buy cans of tinned tuna, adding that he avoided purchasing perishable goods because the lack of electricity means refrigerated food “will rot.”

Alareer, who lives with his wife and their six children, said his neighbors insist on leaving milk powder on the shelves – so that other parents can feed their own families

“I’ve never seen people this disciplined,” he said. “I didn’t buy a single thing that is more expensive than it was last week.

“(What is) so beautiful about, you know, being in Gaza, being in Palestine, the solidarity.”

More than half of the residents in Gaza are food insecure and live under the poverty line, according to UNRWA. Alareer warned that blue collar workers, farmers and street vendors “will suffer the most,” from the blockade.

“We’re bracing for the worst. What happened is extremely genocidal in every sense of the word,” he added.

Aseel Mousa, a 25-year-old freelance journalist in Gaza, said she is unable to communicate with loved ones in other parts of the enclave, as electricity supplies diminish.

“We cannot connect with the world,” she told CNN on Thursday. “We hear the bombings, the air strikes and we don’t know where they are exactly.

“We cannot check up on our relatives who live in different areas of the Gaza Strip, we cannot reach them as there is no internet and there is no electricity.” She said on Friday that she relocated with her family from western Gaza to the south.

On Friday, Alareer told CNN he and his family see no choice but to remain in the north – despite Israel’s evacuation advisory – because they had “nowhere else to go.”

“Israel bombs (are) everywhere,” he said.

**Uncertainty at Rafah Crossing**

Gaza has already been under blockade since Hamas took control of the territory in 2007.

Egypt imposes a land blockade, while Israel imposes an air, sea and land blockade. The siege was completely tightened after Hamas’ attack on Israel a week ago, and the only remaining route into or outside of the Gaza Strip is the Rafah Crossing, which connects Gaza to Egypt’s Sinai.

While some aid has arrived in Egypt, it is yet to cross the border, which earlier this week was struck by Israel on the Palestinian side, according to Palestinian and Egyptian officials.

Egypt on Thursday stressed that [its Rafah Crossing](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/13/middleeast/egypt-rafah-crossing-gaza-palestinians-mime-intl/index.html) was however open, a claim CNN could not independently verify.

A Palestinian border official [told CNN on Saturday](https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-14-23/h_0a13b2ebd2da21ee67a70172934329e8) morning that concrete slabs were being placed at the Rafah border crossing into Egypt, blocking all gates. The slabs were being placed by a winch visible on the Egyptian side of the crossing, the official said.

The official added that hundreds of Palestinians with foreign passports have been sat in the streets for hours, waiting to cross. “The gates are closed, and no one is being let through,”The war in Gaza has been raging for six months and the [patience of Israel’s allies is running out](https://cnn.com/2024/04/04/politics/biden-netanyahu-call-wck-deaths/index.html). As the death toll in the enclave continues to climb, it’s becoming increasingly clear that Israel has no viable plan for how to end the war or what comes next.

The determination to continue pursuing Hamas in Gaza despite the horrific humanitarian consequences is leaving Israel increasingly isolated on the global stage, with its government facing pressure from all sides.

Multiple international organizations have warned Israel may be committing genocide and even the country’s closest allies are now openly criticizing Prime Minister BenjaminNetanyahu. Calls to halt arms shipments to Israel are growing in the United States and the United Kingdom.

At the same time, Netanyahu and his government are under mounting pressure at home, with [protesters back on the streets](https://cnn.com/2024/04/01/middleeast/israel-protests-netanyahu-intl/index.html) in large numbers calling for his resignation.

Israel launched the war immediately after the deadly October 7 terror attacks by Hamas. At that time, the Israeli government said the operation had two goals: eliminating Hamas and bringing back the hostages taken by the militants to Gaza.

While the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) says it has killed thousands of Hamas fighters, most of the group’s top leadership in Gaza, including Yayha Sinwar, continues to evade it, and Hamas’ political leaders are out of reach abroad. More than 100 hostages have been freed, exchanged for Palestinians held in Israeli prisons as part of a truce deal with Hamas in late November. But some 130 hostages, including 99 who are believed still to be alive, remain in Gaza.

Meanwhile, the toll of the war on Palestinians has been horrendous: more than 33,000 people, including thousands of children, have been killed since October 7, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. On top of that, some 75,000 have been injured and more than a million are on the brink of starvation, facing what international organizations say is [“imminent” famine](https://cnn.com/2024/03/19/middleeast/famine-northern-gaza-starvation-ipc-report-intl-hnk/index.html).

“I think (the war) has already far exceeded anybody’s expectations in terms of (its) duration and intensity and scale and deadliness, and there’s no end in sight,” said Khaled Elgindy, senior fellow and director of the Program on Palestine and Israeli-Palestinian Affairs at the Middle East Institute.

Yet Netanyahu is refusing to change tack. While he promised to allow more aid into Gaza following an [ultimatum this week from US President Joe Biden](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/04/politics/biden-netanyahu-call-wck-deaths/index.html), he has rejected calls for a humanitarian ceasefire and for a rethink of his plan to invade Rafah, the southern Gaza city where more than one million people are currently sheltering.

“There is no viable plan for the future of Gaza, not just for the day after, but even today. Nobody knows when this war is going to end, how it’s going to end,” Elgindy told CNN.

**No exit strategy**

Several experts told CNN that Israel was facing an impossible situation because the goal it has set for itself – eliminating Hamas – is both unachievable and very popular domestically.

Hamas has dominated Gaza ever since it seized power in 2007, controlling all government and security bodies, as well as the healthcare, education and social systems.

“Israel cannot achieve its stated goal of eliminating Hamas, because Hamas is an integral part of the Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza. Its [popularity has increased](https://cnn.com/2023/12/21/middleeast/palestinians-back-hamas-survey-intl-cmd/index.html) in the last several months,” said Nathan Thrall, a Jerusalem-based expert on the Arab-Israeli conflict and author of “A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy.”

“After Israel declared that it has defeated Hamas in the north, you see that every week, Israeli soldiers are dying in the north, so it’s evident that Hamas will continue to exist after this war, whether Israel invades Rafah or doesn’t invade Rafah. Hamas is a major power on the ground and will remain so at the end of this war,” Thrall told CNN.

This means that Israel’s leaders don’t have a viable way out of the conflict,

“The realistic options in front of them are to continue to occupy Gaza indefinitely, which most Israelis do not want to do, or, alternatively to leave Gaza and have Hamas be the strongest power on the ground whether or not it’s the official face of the government in Gaza,” he said.

Elgindy also said the goal of destroying Hamas was never realistic. “I think even American officials realize, belatedly, that it’s complete madness, that people are allowing this horror to continue as though the goal of destroying Hamas was more important than anything else in the world, including Israel’s own future security,” he said.

“It’s divorced from reality because even if you destroy Hamas, you’re creating something that will be much worse than the future. Because now you have 30,000 people who are dead, 17,000 orphans … what is their view of Israel and the United States going to be when they grow up?”

Israel was a politically divided country before the October 7 attacks, paralyzed by months of large-scale protests against Netanyahu and his government, the most right-wing in Israel’s history, and particularly the prime minister’s proposed judicial overhaul.

But while these political divisions remain, the vast majority of Israelis support the war in Gaza, despite the international outcry over the devastating impact on Palestinian civilians.

“The Israeli public is still traumatized from October 7, they are still in the revenge mode, some don’t want even food to enter. Even if we don’t accept that it’s right, we can understand what their state of mind is,” Elgindy said, adding that while understandable given the horrors of the October 7 terror attacks, this mindset should not influence international policy.

“We can’t allow that state of mind to dictate the policies of the US and the UK and the European Union. You need to have grownups saying ‘this is not acceptable; you cannot use starvation as a weapon’. In other words, it doesn’t matter that the Israeli public isn’t in the mood for stopping this war. It needs to be forced on them,” he said.

The number of Israeli soldiers killed in combat in Gaza since the start of the war has now surpassed 250. While dwarfed by the Palestinian death toll, the losses are nevertheless significant. Hamas killed more than 1,200 people on October 7. **No plan for the future**

Harel Chorev, senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, told CNN that Israel’s lack of a concrete plan is increasingly hurting its relations with its allies.

“Our friends - America first and foremost, Britain, Germany, France - do not trust the government, that they know what they’re doing, that they have a strategic plan for the day after; they don’t trust us to do the right thing,” he said.

Netanyahu unveiled his plan for [Gaza’s](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/15/middleeast/gaza-history-explained-intl/index.html) post-Hamas future in late February, calling for “complete demilitarization” of the enclave and closing off the territory’s [southern border with Egypt](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/13/middleeast/egypt-boosts-security-border-gaza-israel-war-mime-intl/index.html), as well as the overhaul of Gaza’s civil administration and education systems. He also rejected any pressure from the international community to [recognize a Palestinian state.](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/21/middleeast/netanyahu-palestinian-sovereignty-two-state-solution-intl/index.html)

Many of the proposals were directly opposed by key players at the negotiating table, including the US, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

The plan was one and a half pages, speaking generally about the day after, using all sorts of code words that can be interpreted in all sorts of ways … people were not happy with this, our allies were not happy with this,” Chorev said.

At the same time, Israel continues to refuse even to consider other proposals for the future of Gaza, HA Hellyer, senior associate fellow in security studies at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London and a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC, told CNN.

“There are lots of credible plans, but none of them are workable, frankly, because of one stumbling block. And that’s the Israelis. The Israelis have made it very clear that they intend to have full security control for the entirety of the territory, which of course throws an unworkable wrench in the workings of any plan that seeks to devolve authority to any other entity,” he said.

Netanyahu has previously also rejected the suggestion that the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied West Bank, could take control of Gaza, although the plan outlined in February did not mention this.

Instead, the plan envisions “local entities” running the civil service.

“Again, this was left purposefully vague and it can be interpreted in various ways. It can be local clans, as some interpreted it, and it can be interpreted as a revitalized Palestinian Authority,” Chorev said.

“Most likely, what will happen is, you will have an indefinite Israeli military presence on the ground,” Elgindy said. “You will have something like a breakdown in law and order and more and more chaos. So we’ll see warlords, gangs, clans … Gaza has become a place that is not really livable. If there is someone out there who believes that this is a situation that is going to bring security and safety to Israelis, it’s a completely delusional concept.”

Proposals to establish temporary international security control over Gaza are not feasible given Israel’s stance, experts say.

“If Israel were to admit that it’s an occupying power that needs to withdraw, just as the near entirety of the international community insists, and not to claim the rights of security control over the territory in violation of international law, then you could have something that’s similar to KFOR in Kosovo, an international force as a transition to Palestinians taking over responsibility for the territory,” Hellyer said, referring to the NATO-led peacekeeping force operating in Kosovo.

Thrall also said that most attempts to find alternative plans are not realistic because of Israel’s position.

“They would require placing tremendous pressure on Israel and that is not anywhere in evidence today,” he said, adding that this problem is unlikely to go away even if Netanyahu were to resign.

“In terms of the actual policy toward Gaza, the conduct of this war, the use of the blocking of humanitarian aid as a means of pressuring Hamas in the negotiations, the collective punishment of 2.3 million people in Gaza by cutting off food, water, electricity, those things, there is not great disagreement about by mainstream Israelis,” he said. Netanyahu [insisted in a CNN interview](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2024/03/17/sotu-netanyahu-full-interview.cnn) last month that his country’s policy was to let as much humanitarian aid into Gaza as is necessary, a claim that’s been widely disputed.

Thrall said that anyone potentially replacing Netanyahu as prime minister [would likely put forward similar plans](https://cnn.com/2024/04/05/middleeast/netanyahu-israel-grip-on-power-intl/index.html).

Benny Gantz, who this week called for early elections and is widely considered a likely successor to Netanyahu as and when Israelis vote, is a member of Netanyahu’s war government.

“He does not have a significantly different set of ideas for Gaza or for the future of Israel, Palestine or for Palestinian sovereignty. And if you look at the plan by (fellow war cabinet minister) Gadi Eisenkot, his plan for Gaza, which was supposed to be a rebuttal against Netanyahu’s wholly unrealistic plan, was very similar to it,” Thrall said.

“Whether it’s Netanyahu or somebody else is not the central issue with respect to the Palestinians.”

[Israel’s military](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-05-24/index.html) said its troops made a series of “grave” mistakes and violated protocol in their strikes that [killed seven aid workers](https://cnn.com/2024/04/05/middleeast/israel-idf-world-central-kitchen-strike-report-intl/index.html) in Gaza this week.

An Israeli inquiry published Friday found troops mistakenly thought they were attacking Hamas gunmen when drone strikes targeted three vehicles of the World Central Kitchen (WCK) late Monday night.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fired two of its officers and reprimanded others for their involvement in the strikes, but WCK has said Israel cannot be trusted to investigate its own errors in Gaza, and the incident has sparked fury from many of Israel’s staunchest allies.

Here’s what we know.

**What the IDF says happened**

The IDF has been trying to track down and kill Hamas militants in Gaza for nearly six months, and has long accused Hamas of embedding itself in civilian areas like hospitals, schools – and with aid groups.

In its report, the IDF said its troops identified a Hamas gunman in an aid truck in the central Gazan city of Deir al-Balah on Monday, and then identified a second gunman.

“After the vehicles left the warehouse where the aid had been unloaded, one of the commanders mistakenly assumed the gunmen were located inside the accompanying vehicles and that these were Hamas terrorists,” the IDF said.

An IDF spokesperson separately told CNN that the unit responsible thought an object slung over one of the passenger’s shoulders was a weapon, but Israeli officials now believe the object was a bag.

In fact, the vehicles were being driven by workers with the WCK – a charity founded by celebrity chef Jose Andres that has been helping to distribute food in Gaza as the enclave has tipped further towards famine.

But the Israeli drone operators had not been told by their higher-ups about the humanitarian convoy, according to Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari. In a video statement on Friday, Hagari that “critical information regarding the humanitarian operation” did not “go properly down through the chain of command.

The drone operators proceeded to target the three vehicles with a series of strikes, killing seven workers – three Britons, a Palestinian, a US-Canadian dual citizen, an Australian and a Pole.

Because the strikes happened at night, the surveillance drones could not see the WCK logo on the vehicles, the spokesperson said. The IDF is considering distributing thermal stickers for aid vehicles to prevent this happening again in the future, he added.

After the first vehicle was struck, some of the surviving aid workers fled to the other vehicles in the convoy – which were also struck, the spokesperson said.

**Who did the IDF dismiss and punish?**

The IDF said the strikes were “a grave mistake stemming from a serious failure due to mistaken identification, errors in decision-making, and an attack contrary to the Standard Operating Procedures.”

In response, the Chief of the General Staff dismissed two officers: The brigade fire support commander (an officer with the rank of major), and the brigade chief of staff (an officer with the rank of colonel in reserve).

The IDF also reprimanded others: the brigade commander and 162nd Division commander.

The Chief of Staff also formally reprimanded the commander of the Southern Command for his overall responsibility in the incident.

Israel’s swift public explanation and admission of guilt is rare, as is for such senior officers to be punished

**What the WCK says**

The WCK said earlier in the week that all three vehicles were clearly marked and that their movements were “in full compliance with Israeli authorities, who were aware of their itinerary, route and humanitarian mission.”

Andres accused Israel of “systematically” targeting the aid workers. In a Reuters interview, he said this was not a “bad luck situation where, ‘oops,’ we dropped the bomb in the wrong place.”

Responding to the Israeli report Friday, WCK said Israel had taken “important steps forward” in taking disciplinary action against those responsible, but warned that “without systemic change, there will be more military failures, more apologies and more grieving families.”

WCK said the incident would not have occurred if Israel had not allowed Gaza to run short of food, and called for an independent inquiry into the incident.

“We demand the creation of an independent commission to investigate the killings of our WCK colleagues. The IDF cannot credibly investigate its own failure in Gaza.”

At least 196 humanitarian workers have been killed in the West Bank and Gaza since October, according to the United Nations.

**What have the consequences been?**

The killing of the seven aid workers sparked condemnation from some of Israel’s most prominent supporters and may mark a turning point in how Israel perpetrates its war in Gaza.

In a phone call on Thursday, US President Joe Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the humanitarian situation in Gaza was unacceptable and warned Israel to address the crisis or face consequences.

The 30-minute conversation was the two leaders’ first phone call since the strike on the WCK convoy.

Biden also said Israel needed to “announce and implement a series of specific, concrete, and measurable steps to address civilian harm, humanitarian suffering, and the safety of aid workers.”

The UK has also responded sharply to the strikes, which killed three British nationals. Alicia Kearns, a Conservative Member of Parliament and Chair of the UK’s Foreign Affairs Select Committee, told the BBC on Friday that she believes “we have no choice but to suspend arms sales” to Israel.

Kearns said Biden’s phone call felt like a “tipping point” in the conflict, but said it is “devastating that it’s taken six months for us to get to a point where it appears that the international community is able to influence Israel’s perpetration of this war.”

Amid strong rebukes from its allies, the strikes may also have played a role in Israel’s security cabinet approving the reopening of the Erez crossing into Gaza, which has been closed since the October 7 Hamas attacks.

But distributing that aid may be difficult, after at least three aid providers said they are suspending operations in the Gaza in the wake of the deadly strikes on the WCK.

In a sign of the delicate balance in Netanyahu’s coalition government, Israel’s National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir criticised the firing of the army officers, calling it an “abandonment of the soldiers in the middle of a war and a grave mistake that conveys weakness. “

Nine Israeli soldiers were killed in a single attack in northern Gaza on Tuesday, an incident that was among the deadliest for Israeli forces since the beginning of their ground operation on October 27.

The news sent shockwaves through Israel, where many are still grieving from the October 7 terror attack by Hamas. But analysts say it is unlikely the incident will weaken the support for the war among the Israeli public. The stakes, they say, are way too high.

According to the official count, 116 Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers have been killed in Gaza combat since the start of the invasion.

The number is dwarfed by the enormous death toll among Palestinians in Gaza. According to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza, 18,412 had been killed as of Tuesday. CNN cannot independently verify that number, but the IDF said it has struck more than 22,000 targets in Gaza since the beginning of the war.

“Right now, for the Israeli public, the (threat from) Hamas’ military capabilities is such that we’re willing to go to a relatively high number (of casualties) to destroy it,” security expert and retired IDF Colonel Miri Eisin told CNN.

Eisin’s husband and three children are all currently serving in the IDF. “This doesn’t mean I want to sacrifice my children,” she said.

“No, it means that I don’t know how I can live here unless we destroy Hamas.

Still, the attack on Tuesday hit Israelis hard, and not just because of the high number of dead.

“That combination, that it was a specific brigade that got a lot of the casualties and that it was a large amount of high-ranking officers, made it hurt a lot. We’re hurting today,” Eisin said.

“It’s always hard when soldiers are killed, but when it’s this level of command, it hits you in the gut. These are commanders that commanded hundreds of soldiers,” she added.

The incident brought home the unpredictable nature of the type of war Israel is currently waging in Gaza, Eisin said. The first phase of the operation was limited to aerial and artillery attacks, which caused a large number of Palestinian casualties, but kept Israeli soldiers safe because the IDF has air superiority over Gaza.

But once the IDF put boots on the ground, the balance shifted somewhat. According to the IDF, Hamas has spent a long time preparing for this war, building a vast tunnel system, setting up traps and defenses. This is likely one reason why this invasion has been deadlier for the IDF than its 2014 ground operation in Gaza, which lasted 51 days and left 67 Israeli soldiers dead.

“In urban warfare, the advantage is always on the defender, which is why Hamas built itself into the urban arena and created the subterranean arena underneath this specific urban area,” Eisen said, adding that in such cases, the attacking troops need to “create local advantages” to succeed. “Yesterday, it didn’t work,”

The IDF said the unit involved in the incident on Tuesday was the Golani Brigade, an infantry unit that had been operating within the Shejaiya neighborhood in central eastern Gaza.

In a statement on Wednesday, the IDF said Hamas fighters “threw explosives at the soldiers and shot at them from inside a residential building in which underground terror infrastructure was also located.”

Retired IDF General Israel Ziv told CNN the incident took place in a dense part of the Shejaiya neighborhood, which he said was “known for being exploited by Hamas terrorists to deploy many rocket launchers and to hide entrance pits to underground tunnels, guarded by booby traps.”

“Fighting and clearing [the] terror presence from this area is extremely risky and requires high level of bravery and determination,” Ziv said, explaining that the incident was particularly deadly because after the first infantry team encountered Hamas fighters and booby traps, other teams rushed in to respond.

“That rush was the main reason for the high number of casualties,” he said.

**‘The world does not get it’**

While the overwhelming majority of Israelis still support the Gaza operation, Ziv said there are some who are beginning to question the way the war is fought.

“Incidents like this are (prompting) calls to use more remote measures like air forces, instead of sending troops to fight face to face in those lethal urban areas,” he said.

Ziv and Eisin both said fighting on the ground would help to minimize civilian casualties compared to aerial bombardment.

“The (IDF) casualties yesterday did not have to happen if we had used an airplane,” Eisin asserted.

“But when an airplane brings down the building, if you don’t know exactly what’s on all of the different floors, and if you think there’s civilians there, that’s part of the discussion. It’s a dilemma,” she added.

The huge number of civilian deaths in Gaza has seiously tested international support for Israel, with even some of its closest allies [calling for a humanitarian ceasefire](https://cnn.com/2023/12/12/middleeast/ceasefire-vote-gaza-israel-un-intl/index.html).

Eisin said she sees a widening gap between the public opinion inside Israel and views of those outside the country.

“I absolutely feel that the world does not get it, they do not understand that we see this as an existential threat, that we can’t live here as long as Hamas’ military capabilities exist,” she said.

A senior doctor in northern Gaza says that dozens of medical staffers at his hospital have been taken to an undisclosed location by the Israeli military, as the enclave’s wider healthcare system teeters on the edge of collapse.

Dr. Hossam Abu-Safia, head of pediatrics at Kamal Adwan Hospital, told CNN in a phone interview that the area where the facility is located saw particularly heaving bombing on Tuesday followed by the arrival of Israeli troops, describing the situation as “very dangerous.”

The troops told all men between the ages of 16 and 65 to leave the building to be searched, he said.

More than 70 medical staff were “arrested and taken to an unknown area,” according to Abu-Safia, including hospital director, Dr. Ahmed Al-Kahlot. His claim was echoed in a statement by Gaza’s Hamas-controlled Health Ministry. Al-Kahlot had spoken to CNN less than 24 hours earlier, alleging that Israeli tank shells had hit the hospital’s maternity ward on Monday. The strike killed two women and left two more so badly wounded their legs required amputation, Asked about the arrests, the Israel Defense Forces said that it continues “to act against Hamas strongholds in the north of Gaza, among them the area of Beit Lahia.”

Kamal Adwan hospital is located in Gaza City, not Beit Lahia.

The statement added that the IDF is taking “all feasible precaution to mitigate harm to non-combatants, and is fighting against the Hamas terrorist organization, and not the civilians in Gaza or the medical teams operating there.”

**‘Horrendous conditions’**

Israeli actions in and around hospitals in Gaza have come under [fierce criticism](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/16/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-war-crimes-international-law-explainer-intl/index.html), as medical workers and NGOS warn that the health system in the territory is barely functional and cannot tolerate any more strain.

Last month, the Israeli army [raided Gaza’s largest hospital, Al Shifa](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/15/middleeast/shifa-hospital-gaza-idf-intl/index.html), in search of conclusive proof of the large-scale command and control center it had claimed was there, as doctors rushed to evacuate patients and dozens of newborn infants in need of incubators.

The IDF subsequently brought some reporters to see the tunnels it had uncovered inside the hospital compound, which also included several small underground rooms. CNN has been shown the tunnel shaft but has not been inside the tunnels.

At Al-Rantisi children’s hospital, medical staff were also told to leave, as the IDF conducted operations inside; Israeli military officials later alleged that one room in the building’s basement was a Hamas armory, which had a handful of weapons and a chair with a rope next to it – a claim Gaza health officials denied.

Many medical centers serve as shelters for displaced Gazans seeking safety, in addition to caring for patients. But those seeking refuge in hospitals are finding that “this is just not the case,” Marie-Aure Perreaut, the emergency coordinator for Doctors Without Borders in the enclave.

While hospitals as a category are protected by international law, they may be viewed as legitimate military targets [if found to be](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule28) housing able-bodied combatants and weapons. The Israeli military has said it only carries out operations in and around hospitals where they are being used by Hamas and other armed groups.

According to Dr. Abu-Safia, he and just five other doctors were allowed to stay at Kamal Adwan Hospital to attend to patients in intensive care unit and premature babies.

“They asked us to gather in only one section or building [and] close all the doors and windows, and not to be near doors or windows,” he said.

But the care that the hospital’s remaining staff can offer patients too weak to be moved has been minimal, he said, “due to acute shortages of fuel, water, food, and medical supplies even before the siege.” Today the hospital has no water or power, he added, noting that doctors are “working with primitive flashlights to follow up on the patients left in the hospital.”

Across the besieged enclave, only 11 hospitals remain even partially functional, according to Richard Peeperkorn, the World Health Organization’s (WHO) representative in Gaza, in a press conference Tuesday.

“In just 66 days the health system has gone from 36 functional hospitals to 11 partially functional hospitals - so, one in the north and 10 in the south,” he said.

In the same day, WHO chief [Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](https://twitter.com/DrTedros) said he was “extremely worried” about “reports of a raid at Kamal Adwan Hospital in [#Gaza](https://twitter.com/hashtag/Gaza?src=hashtag_click) after several days of siege,” in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Several hospitals in northern Gaza have ceased operations in recent weeks, saying they received orders from the Israeli military to evacuate. The Israeli military disputes issuing such an order.

Fuel shortages have forced several hospitals in Gaza to close, while others have shut down due to airstrike damage,

The scene inside the [Al-Nasr hospital](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/10/middleeast/gaza-hospital-surrounded-tanks-reported-israeli-strikes-intl/index.html) ICU ward is chilling. The tiny bodies of babies, several still attached to wires and tubes that were meant to keep them alive, decomposing in their hospital beds. Milk bottles and spare diapers still next to them on the sheets.

The video inside the hospital was filmed on November 27 by Mohamed Baalousha, a Gaza reporter for UAE-based news outlet Al Mashhad. He shared an unblurred version with CNN, which shows the remains of at least four infants.

Three of them appear to be still connected to hospital machines. The bodies of the babies appear to be darkening and disintegrating from decay, with little more than skeletons left in some of the beds. Flies and maggots are visibly crawling across the skin of one child.

The circumstances around one of the most horrifying videos to emerge from the [war in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/07/middleeast/gaza-israeli-soldiers-detained-men-intl/index.html) remain unclear, but after days of piecing together available information, using interviews, published statements and video, a chaotic scene can been painted of hospital staff trying to protect their most vulnerable patients, caught in the middle of a raging battle – waiting for help that never arrived.

**Here is what CNN found**

CNN geolocated the video to Al-Nasr hospital in northern Gaza. This area has been largely unreachable to journalists in recent weeks due to the intensity of fighting but during the seven-day truce Baalousha says he was able to access the hospital to film what was left there.

Ad Feedback

From early November, the Al-Nasr and Al-Rantisi children’s hospitals, which form part of the same complex, had become the frontline of fighting between Israeli and Hamas forces.

In public statements and interviews, several medical staff and health officials from Al-Nasr said they had to hurriedly evacuate the hospital on November 10, under the direction of Israeli forces.

Medical staff described having to leave young children behind in the ICU because they had no means to safely move them.

A doctor associated with the hospital, who did not want to be named, told CNN that two of the children – a two-year-old and a nine-month-old baby – had died shortly before the evacuation but that three children were left alive still connected to respirators. One of those left alive was two months old. Several of the infants on the ICU had been suffering from genetic disorders, according to the doctor.

The condition of those left behind alive – both at the time the fighting reached the hospital and when the evacuation took place – remains unclear.

In a video on November 9, the head of Al-Nasr and Al-Rantisi pediatric hospitals, Dr. Mustafa al-Kahlout, said Al-Nasr hospital had been “struck twice” sustaining “a lot of damage.”

Kahlout warned oxygen to the ICU “was cut off” and reported at least one patient had died as a result, with others facing the risk of death.

It’s unclear whether oxygen cylinders, seen next to some of the beds in the video from the hospital, were functioning or whether supplies had run out.

“The situation is really bad, we are surrounded… ambulances cannot reach the hospital, and ambulances that tried to reach Al-Nasr were targeted,” Kahlout said, calling on international organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to intervene and save the medical staff and patients who remained in the ICU.

Video shared on social media on November 9, which CNN verified, was filmed from inside Al-Nasr hospital and appears to show the aftermath of the building being hit.

Another from November 10 showed an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) tank outside Al-Nasr, indicating the IDF was operating in the area. Another video from the same date showed civilians holding up makeshift white flags attempting to flee the hospital amid gunfire, then being forced to run back inside. It is not possible to tell from the video who is shooting.

Satellite imagery reviewed by CNN from November 11 shows large craters around the hospital complex, indicating the area had been under bombardment, making evacuation difficult.

But, in an [audio recording](https://x.com/idf/status/1723419278383223295?s=48) of a conversation between a senior official at Al-Rantisi hospital and an officer from COGAT, which coordinates the Israeli government’s activities in the Palestinian territories and Gaza, it appears Israeli forces instructed hospital patients and staff to evacuate.

In the recording, released by the IDF on November 11, the Israeli officer assures the hospital official that ambulances will be arranged.

The hospital official tells the COGAT officer that ambulances cannot reach the hospital, and the officer replies: “I’ll arrange coordination with the primary aid center. Don’t worry, I’m near the army, it will be okay.”

“Will the ambulances take the patients and the medical staff?” the hospital official asks.

“No problem,” the COGAT officer responds, in the recording.

The hospital official then confirms that the COGAT officer is aware that people will be evacuating both Al-Nasr and Al-Rantisi hospitals, and the COGAT officer says “yes, yes.”

But hospital officials say the ambulances never arrived.

“Many of the patients were carried out by their families, ambulances couldn’t reach the hospital,” Kahlout said in a news conference on November 14, following the evacuation.

Three children were left in the ICU attached to hospital machines but without oxygen, Kahlout said.

In an [audio recording](https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0Q-sUlquZA/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==) from November 10 released by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) a nurse who the organization said was volunteering in a personal capacity, said the hospital had been shelled, hitting multiple floors, water tanks, and electricity and oxygen stations.

The nurse – who CNN is not identifying for security reasons – said Al-Nasr staff were given 30 minutes to evacuate by the IDF, adding no ambulances were able to reach the hospital.

“We walked out a little bit there was shooting around us,” he said in the recording. Then he said someone from the IDF told him “I’ll give you safe passage, you have from 1130am until 12 noon.”

“So, we walked out with our hands up in the air carrying white flags and carrying families and children,” the nurse said in the recording.

He said he managed to carry one baby with him as he escaped and handed it to an ambulance headed for the Al-Shifa hospital. But four children were left behind in the ICU according to the nurse, in a discrepancy from the number given by Kahlout.

“To leave my patient dying in front of my eyes is the hardest thing I have ever experienced, it’s indescribable, they broke our hearts, we couldn’t help them, we couldn’t take them, we barely left ourselves with our children, we are civilians, we are a medical crew, we are displaced civilians,” he said in the recording.

Over the past week, CNN has tried to speak to medical staff and hospital officials from Al-Nasr, but all have either said they are too afraid to speak or cannot be reached.

The director of Gaza’s hospitals at the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health, Dr. Mohammad Zaqout, told CNN that people in the hospital were forced to leave by the IDF.

“We were forced to leave them behind to die because we didn’t have a safe medical evacuation… we informed them that these children were on beds and couldn’t be evacuated. We held other children in our arms while being forced to evacuate,” Zaqout said.

The IDF has strongly denied responsibility for the deaths of the children in Al-Nasr ICU. “Given that the IDF did not operate inside the Al-Nasr hospital, these allegations are not only false but also a perverse exploitation of innocent lives, used as tools to spread dangerous misinformation,” the IDF said in a statement to CNN.

Asked repeatedly by CNN why it hadn’t provided ambulances for the evacuation, as the COGAT officer had promised in the [recorded conversation](https://x.com/idf/status/1723419278383223295?s=48) with the hospital official, and if they were aware of the presence of children left in the ICU, as Zaqout alleged, the IDF did not directly respond.

During an [online Q&A](https://twitter.com/i/spaces/1BRJjPOzoYaKw?s=20) for journalists Saturday, IDF spokesman Doron Spielman dismissed the story as merely a “rumor.”

“There were no premature babies that decomposed because of the IDF. There were probably no babies that decomposed whatsoever,” Spielman said. “But Hamas is in charge of Nasr hospital, we are not occupying Nasr hospital.”

Israel has repeatedly accused Hamas of using hospitals as command centers and even as places to hold hostages.

Zaqout denies the allegation and has repeatedly called for “neutral entities, human rights organizations, and media outlets to enter the hospitals and verify for themselves that they are used solely for civilian and humanitarian purposes.”

CNN cannot independently confirm what state the children were in when they were left at the hospital. But Stefan Schmitt, a forensic scientist at Florida International University reviewed the video for CNN and said the level of decomposition of the infants was advanced.

Schmitt said he believed the room had not been disturbed since the children were left. “Those remains decomposed in situ, meaning they decomposed there on those beds,” he said. “You can see that from the bodily fluids that have leaked out over the time of decomposition.”

Schmitt also said one of the corpses appeared to be wrapped in fabric, possibly a shroud, noting there was no medical equipment attached to the body, suggesting the body may already have been dead or severely injured. The room appeared to have been abandoned in a hurry, Schmitt continued, noting the infant car seat and what appears to be a bag packed for one of the children next to its bed.

A statement from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Ministry of Health issued in response to the video of the babies’ remains said Al-Nasr nursing staff were ordered to leave by the IDF, who told them the ICRC was coming to evacuate the patients.

“Instead, their decomposed bodies were found in their beds,” reads the statement. “These babies drew their last breaths alone and died alone.”

The ICRC told CNN it received “several requests” for evacuation from hospitals in the north of Gaza, but due to the “security situation” it was “not involved in any operations or evacuations, nor did teams commit to doing so.” The ICRC added the footage of the deceased children was an “unspeakable tragedy.”

Cataclysmic events like [the Hamas onslaught on Israel](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-gaza-attack-10-09-23/index.html) trigger profound political shocks and strategic transformations that no one could predict at the time.

The rocket attacks, hostage takings and mass killings inside Israel came as the global order was already at a pivot point, with the post-Cold War era swept away by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s superpower ascent.

The raw shock over what just happened – the scenes of gunned down civilians at an [Israeli music festival](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/israel-hamas-music-festival-aftermath-intl-hnk/index.html), the wrenching accounts of families torn apart and the fierce first burst of Israeli reprisal attacks on Gaza – are transfixing the world.

But [politics](http://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/politics/republicans-blame-biden-israel-what-matters/index.html) is never still for long. The sudden and bloody shattering of a rare interregnum of calm and hope for diplomatic breakthroughs in the Middle East is already shifting calculations in Israel, the United States, the Arab world and across the globe.The Hamas assault has been compared to the September 11 attacks in the United States in 2001 – as a comparatively low-tech assault on civilians that breached the homeland of a more powerful and sophisticated adversary, partly by defying the imagination of threat assessors in a complacent national security and political establishment.

The lesson of that historic trauma was that the political and military steps taken by American and other leaders when normal politics roared back to life did not just change the world through military action. They unleashed extraordinary political forces inside nations like the United States and Britain, creating conditions that are still influencing society and elections.

This may be where Israel finds itself now. The Jewish state is no stranger to rocket attacks from Gaza or Lebanon or bus and suicide bombings. But the Hamas invaders just shattered Israelis’ illusions of their own security more deeply than at any time since the Yom Kippur war in 1973 when Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked. This sense of emotional violation will condition Israel’s response in the days ahead and will influence how the rest of the world reacts to its fight-back.

Compounding Israel’s national wound is the extreme political challenge now facing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who set himself up as the ultimate guarantor of Israeli security but whose long watch will now be mostly remembered for one of the most devastating defeats and intelligence failures in his nation’s history. For now, the schisms in Israeli society, which have been caused by Netanyahu’s far-right coalition and his attempts to reform the judicial system in a way that critics said threatened democracy, have closed in the wider cause of national unity. But the veteran Israeli leader has an incentive to launch a devastating response to the attack to cover his political vulnerabilities as well to avenge Israel’s agony. The excruciating reality that Hamas is holding Israeli hostages that it can use as leverage against Netanyahu makes the situation even more intense. The long-term political consequences are impossible to predict.

“What we will do to our enemies in the coming days will resonate with them for generations,” Netanyahu said in a national address on Monday.

The Israeli leader’s comments raised the immediate question of whether a relentless Israeli counter-assault could all but eliminate Hamas in Gaza in the days ahead. But another lesson from 9/11 is that wars launched in the dark weeks after an attack don’t always turn out as hoped and risk rebounding against leaders who launch them. Israel has already experienced the price of an incursion into densely populated Gaza, an urban warren of sprawling refugee camps, for instance. And after 9/11, the Bush administration’s war on terror caused after-effects for years – including war fatigue and cynicism about government that helped nurture the presidencies of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

Those sentiments linger. In launching his independent bid for the presidency on Monday, which could have unpredictable consequences in critical swing states, [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](http://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/politics/kennedy-independent-campaign/index.html) repeatedly slammed the military industrial complex and the “long pipeline of continuous wars” more than 20 years after 9/11.

**The world will have to react to Israeli’s reaction**

Israel’s next moves will be critical. So far, the overwhelming emotions have been empathy and horror. But if Israel’s counter-attack against Hamas leads to even greater civilian casualties in Gaza or if the enclave is cut off from water and electricity for days in an Israeli siege, the politics even inside allied nations – where white and blue lights daub public monuments – may begin to change.

Joe Biden, one of the most unequivocally pro-Israel Democratic presidents in living memory, is expected to address the attacks in televised remarks on Tuesday. So far, he has buried his animosity with Netanyahu, who still hasn’t visited the White House during Biden’s tenure. The Israeli leader said on Monday he’s been in “continuous contact” with Biden since the attacks. The US is surging air defense materiel and munitions to Israel and has offered intelligence support for hostage rescue operations. As a show of support and deterrence to Israel’s enemies, Washington is moving an aircraft carrier group to the eastern Mediterranean.



[How Republicans are trying to blame Biden for the attacks on Israel](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/09/politics/republicans-blame-biden-israel-what-matters/index.html)

But at some point in the weeks ahead, the interests of the United States and Israel may diverge. If evidence emerges, for instance, that Iran played a direct role in planning the assaults by its proxy Hamas, the pressure on Netanyahu for a direct strike against the Islamic Republic will become intense. Washington will be concerned about the scale of any such action since the last thing that Biden needs as he embarks on his reelection race is for the US to get dragged into another Middle East war.

The American president also needs to protect his political flanks, especially from a GOP trying to portray him as old and weak. Republicans, led by ex-President Donald Trump, pounced on the Hamas attacks, seeking to saddle Biden with the blame over his attempts to defuse a US confrontation with Iran. Trump also attempted to fuse an inflammatory US domestic issue – the southern border – with events in the Middle East by claiming without evidence that the “same people” who attacked Israel were streaming into the United States. Another GOP presidential candidate, South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, repeated his claim that Biden was “complicit” in “this actual war against Israel.”

Republicans have seized on the unfreezing of $6 billion in Iranian funds under a deal to free US hostages last month. The administration insists the money hasn’t been spent yet and can only be used to buy humanitarian and medical supplies under strict international monitoring. But by blurring the facts, Republicans are creating a damaging public narrative designed to influence voter opinion. This kind of hard knuckle politics can work. Incessant conservative media coverage of Biden’s handling of the chaotic US military withdrawal from Afghanistan is still frequently brought up at Republican campaign events by voters who may not be deeply familiar with the details of the US exit but see the drama as shorthand for incompetence.

Biden must also be aware of political fallout on his left. Progressive Democrats have been increasingly critical of Israel in recent years, both for its treatment of Palestinians in Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, and the West Bank, which is led by the Palestinian Authority, and because of the extreme tilt of Netanyahu’s coalition, which is the most-right wing government in Israeli history. Biden, whose own party has questioned his reelection bid, cannot afford to lose progressive support next year.

**Far reaching foreign policy consequences**

Biden’s legacy could also take a hit from the Israeli turmoil. His effort to shepherd a normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia that could revamp the geopolitics of the Middle East looks at best stalled. Saudi Arabia will not have the political room to negotiate with Netanyahu while hundreds of Palestinians are being killed in Israeli reprisal attacks in Gaza. Netanyahu has even less bandwidth to make hard territorial concessions to the Palestinians in the West Bank that the deal would likely require to get over the line. The historic nature of the proposed deal is one reason why Iran may have had a strong incentive to support Hamas’ attack, even if the US says at this point there is no concrete evidence proving its involvement.

The consequences of the attack on Israel could also negatively impact another Biden priority – the war in Ukraine. While Israel will get higher-tech weapons from the US than Kyiv – like interceptors for [Iron Dome](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/world/iron-dome-israel-defense-explained-intl-dg/index.html) – a prolonged regional war could further strain US reserve armories already depleted by shipments to Ukraine. Biden might try to draw parallels between US support for Israel and his backing for Ukraine, another sovereign democratic nation facing outside attack. But Republicans who already oppose more aid to Kyiv are likely to argue that Washington should prioritize its old friend and cannot afford to help both.

All of these developments could precipitate wider strategic political reverberations. The US has been trying to pivot away from the Middle East and toward Asia for a decade and a half. But any sense in Beijing and Moscow that America is getting distracted by the region again will offer openings for US adversaries. The possibility that China, Russia and Iran could find common cause against the United States has long preoccupied US foreign policy experts. There is no formal anti-US alliance involving those three great adversaries. But as the world appears to be organizing itself into democratic and autocratic blocs, the authoritarian leaders in all three countries have discovered military, economic and strategic synergies through their common antipathy to Washington. And if the US is challenged or weakened in Europe, the Middle East or the Asia-Pacific region, all three could benefit.

In politics and international relations, everything is connected and one action sparks counter-reactions. So the war in Israel and Gaza will resonate far more widely than a cursed corner of the Middle East.

The US government is [not yet willing](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/08/politics/us-intelligence-iran-connection-israel-attack/index.html) to draw a direct line between Iran and the [shocking sneak attacks](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-war-explained-mime-intl/index.html) by Hamas militants on Israel outside the Gaza Strip, but President Joe Biden’s domestic political rivals are convinced.

* Former President Donald Trump argued, falsely, that US taxpayer dollars went to Iran and were funneled to Hamas. He also, with characteristic over-the-top rhetoric, argued his administration “brought so much peace to the Middle East.” And during a campaign appearance in New Hampshire, he tried to compare the violent attacks on Israel with the flow of asylum-seeking migrants at the US border with Mexico – although there is clearly no comparison between asylum-seekers and terrorists killing hundreds.
* Sen. Tim Scott, the Republican from South Carolina, told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer Monday night that the Biden administration was “complicit” in the attack on Israel because of the same Iranian funds criticized by Trump.
* Biden’s policies, according to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who was speaking in Iowa, were “very deferential to the Iranians, the Iranians we now know were intimately involved in orchestrating these attacks.”
* Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who was US ambassador to the United Nations for part of Trump’s administration, said the US must support Israel to guard against Iran. “Israel is the frontline of defense for the Iranian regime and terrorists that want to hurt us and want to hurt our friends,” Haley said, appearing on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on Sunday.

This is a domestic debate about Iran thatwill coincide with what could be a protracted war betweenIsrael and Hamas.

**Why did Trump say taxpayer dollars went to Iran?**

Most of what Trump said is false. US taxpayer dollars did not go to Iran.

However, the Biden administration negotiated for the release in September of five Americans who had been held by Tehran. What bought their freedom was the release of $6 billion in Iranian funds – proceeds from the sale of its oil held in restricted South Korean accounts – frozen by international sanctions on Iran. [Read more on the prisoner dealfrom CNN’s Nadeen Ebrahim](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/18/middleeast/iran-us-prisoner-deal-bad-blood-mime-intl/index.html).

The deal stipulated that the money would have to be used for humanitarian purposes and that Qatar, which helped broker the deal, would hold the money rather than having it go straight to Iran.

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**$6 billion could have freed up money elsewhere**

Critics, like Haley, have argued that if Iran got $6 billion for humanitarian purposes, that frees up money elsewhere.

“They go and spread terrorism every time they get one dollar,” Haley said. “It doesn’t go to the Iranian people. It does go to terrorist attacks.”

The arguments are similar when it comes to the deal between Iran and Western countries regarding Iran’s nuclear program.

That deal, engineered by former President Barack Obama and Biden during his time as vice president, was subsequently scuttled by Trump. But it was never to send US taxpayer money to Iran; rather, it was to lift some sanctions on Iran in exchange for controls on Iran’s nuclear program.

**Was Iran involved in the Hamas attacks?**

Iran has both commended the operation by Hamas and denied involvement, according to [a report by Ebrahim](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-iran-israel-attack-analysis-intl/index.html).

The US has not directly linked Iran to the attacks, but it does view Iran as “broadly complicit,” according to deputy national security adviser Jon Finer, appearing Monday on ABC’s “Good Morning America.”

Iran has given large amounts of support to [Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-attack-strategy-israel-mime-intl/index.html), the group that controls Gaza and that the US and Western countries have labeled as a terror organization.

**Why would Iran have an interest in war between Hamas and Israel?**

CNN’s national security analyst Peter Bergen effectively [connects the dots](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/07/opinions/hamas-attacks-israel-palestine-diplomacy-bergen/index.html), arguing Iran and Hamas have an interest in stopping a move toward normal relations between Israel and Arab nations.

“There appears also to be a larger play going on here,” Bergen writes for CNN Opinion. “An attempt to end the rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states that began in earnest during the Trump Administration with the Abraham Accords.”

**What were the Abraham Accords?**

This was the historic deal spearheaded by Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner during the Trump administration, under which Arab nations including Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Sudan recognized Israeli sovereignty.

Palestinian leaders, Bergen notes, opposed the Abraham Accords because it divorced their cause – the creation of a Palestinian state – from broader recognition of Israel in the Arab world.

**How Biden has continued Trump’s Israel policy**

The Biden administration has tried to capitalize on momentum from Trump’s success with the Abraham Accords to negotiate a deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

An active war between Hamas and Israel will seriously complicate that effort.

“I believe if Iran didn’t stimulate or encourage it, it sure understands it is a huge beneficiary of it,” The New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman told CNN’s Fareed Zakaria on Sunday. “The last thing Iran wants was a US-Saudi-Israel strategic alliance to counterbalance Iran. Right now, that’s no longer possible.”

**A split in the GOP too**

While most of the Republican presidential candidates focused on Biden with their criticisms, former Vice President Mike Pence argued this is a wake-up call for Republicans like Trump who have been moving the party toward a more isolationist worldview – not onlywith regard to Israel, but also to Ukraine.

“That’s the debate here,” [Pence said Sunday on CNN](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/10/08/sotu-pence-full.cnn). “Whether we’re going to shrink from our role as leader of the free world, or whether we’re going to lean in in this moment in Israel, and also in eastern Europe. … We’re going to stand strong with our allies and stand up to our enemies.”

A UN Security Council vote on a resolution meant to spur more humanitarian aid into Gaza has been delayed again and is now expected Wednesday, according to two sources familiar with the matter.

Intense negotiations were underway at the United Nations ahead of an expected vote Tuesday on a resolution calling for a halt in hostilities to allow much needed aid to enter [Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-19-23/index.html), according to diplomats.

Diplomats had been working behind closed doors to finalize a resolution drafted by the United Arab Emirates.

The vote was originally scheduled for Monday, but was delayed a day to allow more time for negotiations.

The delay into Wednesday suggests agreement hasn’t yet been reached on language that could gain a “yes” vote from the United States, or at least an abstention, which would allow the measure to pass.

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“We’re still working through the modalities of the resolution,” US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told CNN during a Tuesday afternoon briefing at the White House. “It’s important for us that the rest of the world understand what’s at stake here and what Hamas did on the 7th of October and how Israel has a right to defend itself against those threats.”

The draft resolution is said to have originally included a call for a “cessation of hostilities” to allow much-needed aid to enter Gaza. Diplomats were hopeful that changing the language to “suspension of hostilities” could gain American support.

The US has vetoed previous measures at the UN Security Council and voted against a call for a ceasefire in the larger UN General Assembly.

If the US eventually allows the resolution to pass, it would amount to an important signal to Israel — including from its top ally — of the growing international outcry over the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

During the Security Council meeting, a senior US diplomat said that while the attacks by Hamas on October 7 were atrocities that must be condemned, civilians and journalists must still be protected and vital humanitarian aid needs to reach civilians.

Deputy Ambassador to the UN Robert Wood did not imply how the United States will vote on the upcoming resolution calling for a suspension of hostilities in Gaza to allow for the delivery of critically needed humanitarian aid.

Wood also expressed concern about the alarming increase in Israeli settler violence in the West Bank, saying the United States condemns the violence by settlers and urges the Israeli government to investigate the violence and hold the settlers accountable.

Earlier this month, the United States vetoed a resolution in the 15-member UNSC that included the word “ceasefire” in the text. Wood told the Security Council at the time it was because there was no mention of the October 7 Hamas attacks in the draft.

As one of the five permanent members of the UNSC, a US veto means the resolution will not pass.

According to Nusseibeh, who was involved in drafting the text and leads the 22-member Arab group as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, intensive efforts to pass the latest resolution come amid a “critical” need to stop hostilities and allow in aid as the humanitarian crisis in the enclave reaches “catastrophic” levels.

“Every single day, innocent people in Gaza are struggling desperately for want of food, water, medicine and fuel. Members of the UN Security Council have seen the consequences of this humanitarian catastrophe firsthand, and the need for more aid could not be clearer,” Nusseibeh said.

“This Council resolution responds to that need by opening border crossings, the transport of aid by land, sea, and air, and a UN-led mechanism that would streamline inspection, monitoring, and approvals. It underlines the critical importance of stopping hostilities to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid and we will continue to aggressively pursue that goal.”

Nusseibeh also said, “These deliverables are important to save lives, and our approach – from the start – has been focused on ensuring adoption. That has been the basis of our engagement with Council Members, including the US, in the negotiations with whom we have been discussing this text closely and in good faith alongside the concerned Arab countries.”

Last week, the wider United Nations General Assembly voted to demand an immediate ceasefire in war-torn Gaza, in a rebuke to the United States, which has repeatedly blocked ceasefire calls in the Security Council. While the General Assembly vote is politically significant and seen as wielding moral weight, it is nonbinding, unlike a Security Council resolution.

Both Hamas and Israel have committed war crimes in the past month, the United Nations human rights chief said, as thousands of Palestinians [fled south](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/08/world/palestinians-fleeing-south-gaza-city-unbearable-situation/index.html) amid Israel’s intensifying offensive against the Islamist militant group.

“The atrocities perpetrated by Palestinian armed groups on October 7 were heinous, brutal and shocking, they were war crimes – as is the continued holding of hostages,” said Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“The collective punishment by Israel of Palestinian civilians amounts also to a war crime, as does the unlawful forcible evacuation of civilians,” he added.

Israel declared war on Hamas on October 7 after militants killed 1,400 people in Israel and kidnapped about 240 others, according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

The ensuing Israeli assault on Gaza has plunged the strip into crisis, with mass displacement and severe shortages of food, water, fuel and medical supplies.

The IDF has repeatedly called on civilians to move to the southern half of the strip to avoid the fighting, and has opened daily evacuation corridors to allow them to do so, as it intensifies attacks on Hamas in Gaza City and northern Gaza, saying it would strike the militants “wherever necessary.”

That has caused [a growing exodus](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/07/middleeast/gaza-civilian-casualty-criticism-grows-israel/index.html) in the past week of Palestinians fleeing south.

Civilians on Wednesday [described unbearable conditions](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/08/world/palestinians-fleeing-south-gaza-city-unbearable-situation/index.html) after traveling miles on foot through the battered enclave.

One teenage girl compared the mass movement to the “Nakba,” or catastrophe, the Arabic term for the expulsion of Palestinians from their towns during the founding of Israel.

A man who did not provide his name told CNN that he and his neighbors had lived through “horrifying days” and the war had “left nothing left safe.”

Speaking Wednesday, Türk urged both sides to agree to a ceasefire to allow the delivery of aid to Gaza, the release of hostages by Hamas, and “the political space to implement a durable end to the occupation.”

Even in the context of a 56-year-old occupation, the current situation is the most dangerous in decades faced by people in Gaza, in Israel, in the West Bank but also regionally,” he said.

The Israeli military has pushed back against accusations of war crimes, saying its strikes on Hamas targets followed international law and sought to minimize civilian casualties.

Israel’s attacks have [killed at least 10,515 people](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/07/world/gaza-death-toll-accuracy-unicef-intl-hnk/index.html) and injured more than 26,000 others in Gaza since the war began, according to a Wednesday report by the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah, drawing from sources in the Hamas-controlled enclave.

Women, children and the elderly make up about 74% of those deaths, the report added. It’s unclear how many combatants are included in the total, and CNN cannot independently verify these figures

Türk delivered his comments after visiting the Rafah crossing on the Gaza-Egypt border – the only border crossing not controlled by Israel. In recent weeks, it has been opened to allow the limited entry of aid, and the exit of foreign nationals and severely injured Palestinians from Gaza.

He said the Rafah crossing is a symbolic lifeline for the more than 2 million people in Gaza and called for more aid to be delivered, saying: “The lifeline has been unjustly, outrageously thin.”

“In Rafah I have witnessed the gates to a living nightmare,” he [said in a statement](https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/11/un-human-rights-chief-visits-rafah-border-crossing-gaza). “A nightmare where people have been suffocating, under persistent bombardment, mourning their families, struggling for water, for food, for electricity and fuel.”

The main UN agency operating in Gaza said Thursday it was able to deliver medical supplies to Al-Shifa hospital, Gaza’s largest medical facility, “despite huge risks to our staff and health partners due to relentless bombardments.”

The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) described the conditions in the hospital as “disastrous,” saying there were almost two patients for every bed.

Hospital wards are overflowing, with patients being treated on the floor, and tens of thousands of displaced Gazans seeking shelter in the facility’s parking lots and yards, it said.

Aid organizations have also highlighted the dangers of delivering supplies within Gaza. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on Tuesday [said](https://www.icrc.org/en/document/israel-and-occupied-territories-icrc-decries-shooting-its-humanitarian-convoy-gaza) its convoy had come under fire but did not apportion blame. Two trucks were damaged in the attack and a driver sustained minor injuries, the ICRC said.

The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) later said Israel was responsible for firing on the convoy.

The IDF has not responded to CNN questions about this incident. But it has previously rejected accusations that it deliberately targets medical transport and blamed Hamas for “operating from nearby, underneath and within densely populated areas.” Thousands of Palestinians fled northern Gaza on Wednesday, traveling miles on foot through the battered enclave in a growing exodus as Israel intensifies its ground and air campaign.

Streams of people – women, children, the elderly and disabled – made their way down Salah Eddin Street, one of the two north-south highways in Gaza, along an evacuation corridor announced by the Israel Defense Forces.

One teenage girl compared the mass movement to the “Nakba,” or catastrophe, the Arabic term for the expulsion of Palestinians from their towns during the founding of Israel.

It was the fifth day in a row that the IDF opened an evacuation window, and numbers of people fleeing south have increased each day.

The UN said 2,000 had fled south on Sunday, rising to 15,000 on Tuesday. The Israeli government said 50,000 Gazans travelled via the evacuation corridor Wednesday. That number could not be independently verified, but a CNN journalist at the scene said the numbers leaving were larger than on Tuesday.

Israel has been ramping up its offensive inside Gaza, following the October 7 attacks that left 1,400 people in Israel dead.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant claimed Tuesday that IDF troops were at the “heart of Gaza City” and targeting Hamas infrastructure and commanders there. It is unclear where exactly Israel is fighting.

“Gaza is the biggest terror stronghold that mankind has ever built. This whole city is one big terror base. Underground, they have kilometers of tunnels connecting to hospitals and schools,” Gallant said. “We continue to dismantle this capability.”

The IDF has been bombarding Gaza for weeks, saying it hit 14,000 terrorist targets in the densely packed territory.

A man who did not provide his name told a CNN journalist in southern Gaza that he and his neighbors had lived through “horrifying days.” He said that they had left their home in northern Gaza and moved several times, but that it was impossible to escape the airstrikes.

“This war left nothing safe – not churches, not mosques or anything. Today, they dropped the leaflet ordering us to leave to the alleged safe area. Now we are beyond this area of Wadi Gaza, and we are still hearing bombardments. There is no safe place in Gaza.”

“We are seven families. All of our houses are gone. Nothing is left. We couldn’t take anything – no clothes, no water, nothing. The way here was very difficult. If something falls, you are not allowed to pick it up. You are not allowed to slow down. Dead bodies everywhere.”

Baraa, a 16-year-old girl, said that she had been walking for a long time.

“It felt like the Nakba [catastrophe] of 2023,” she said, using the Arabic term for the expulsion of Palestinians from their towns during the founding of Israel.

“We walked by people who were ripped to parts, dead bodies. We walked beside tanks. The Israelis called us, and they were asking people to take off their clothes and throw their belongings. Children were very tired because there was no water.”

CNN has asked the IDF about the allegation that evacuees were made to remove clothing and get rid of belongings.

“We came under heavy shelling and had no choice but to leave our area,” Hani Bakhit said. “We ended up using donkey carts because there were no cars, fuel, or drinking water available. Nothing is left for us. They forced us to leave by cutting off all available resources,” he said, referring to Israeli forces.

“People who have nothing to do with the resistance are being bombed and so they are fleeing to the south,” Khader Hamad said. “They are all children, newborns, women.” People carried few possessions in the arms or on their backs. Some sat on carts drawn by donkeys. On Tuesday, some could be seen carrying white flags and holding aloft identity documents.

“Donkey carts are the only means of transportation left,” Abu Ida said. “There is no solar power or fuel left for cars, but also those who have cars are afraid to use them. I cannot walk because I have diabetes, there’s no way I can walk on my feet.”

A woman who did not provide her name said “we are being destroyed.”

“No one cares about us. Maybe we are safe now, but I’m not sure about those who are still behind. I don’t know where my family is. My siblings are behind me. Out of fear, I couldn’t look behind. Not right, not left.

“We came from Al Shifa [Hospital], and we saw death on the way. Dead bodies, destruction everywhere.” Amos Shani Atzmon says he doesn’t blame Palestinians in Gaza for hating Israel right now.

“They have really good reasons. When you see cities on fire and are getting bombed … I had one close friend killed in Gaza and I am thinking about the people whose entire families died in bombing,” he said.

An Israel Defence Forces (IDF) reservist, Atzmon, 26, was called up just hours after Hamas launched its brutal terror attack on Israel, murdering around 1,200 people and kidnapping 253 others.

Israel swiftly retaliated to the October 7 assault with a massive aerial bombardment campaign, followed by a ground operation. More than 27,000 people have been killed in Gaza since, according to the Hamas-controlled Health Ministry in the enclave. According to UN agencies, 400,000 Gazans are at risk of starving

The ministry does not distinguish between Hamas fighters and civilians, but says about 70% of the casualties are women and children. Israel estimates it has killed about 10,000 Hamas militants since October 7. CNN is not able to independently confirm those numbers

The international community, including some of Israel’s closest allies, are increasingly horrified at the scale of the violence inflicted on civilians in Gaza.

The [International Court of Justice](https://cnn.com/2024/01/26/middleeast/israel-genocide-case-icj-hague-ruling-south-africa-intl/index.html) (ICJ) found in a preliminary ruling that South Africa had a right to pursue its genocide case against Israel, and that Palestinians had a right to be protected from genocide. While it has not yet ruled on whether Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, the ICJ said that “at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible.”

It ordered Israel to “take all measures” to limit the death and destruction caused by its military campaign, prevent and punish incitement to genocide, and ensure access to humanitarian aid.

Regardless, little has changed on the ground.

Atzmon said he is the “left-wing guy” in his unit. Like tens of thousands of others, he had spent most of last spring and summer protesting against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his plans to overhaul Israel’s judiciary.

Netanyahu’s government is the most right-wing in Israel’s history, rejecting the idea of a Palestinian state and supporting Jewish settlements inside the West Bank.

Atzmon, meanwhile, wants Israel to work towards a two-state solution. “The Palestinian people will never stop fighting us until they have their own autonomy. And I think the end goal needs to be that,” he said.

His political views are sometimes difficult to square with the realities of being a soldier, fighting on behalf of a government he doesn’t support. He says he’s been grappling with this since he started forming his political opinions around the age of 15, anticipating his military service – something almost everyone in Israel must complete.

“I’m devastated about the death of people in Gaza, kids, the elderly. Just normal men (aged) 26, like me, we don’t want to die. But I have the right to defend myself and to defend my family, my friends, my loved ones,” he said, rejecting the notion that the Hamas terror attack was an act of “resistance” against the Israeli blockade. “I’m not saying this is not a complex situation. But I’m 100% sure that I’m on the right side of history, and that I’m trying to defend people.”

“What happened in the kibbutzim felt like the most inhuman thing I ever witnessed. So when I’m facing this kind of evil, I felt, and I still feel, that entering the war is the only way. Because these are not people I can speak with or comprehend,

Hundreds of people were murdered in Be’eri, Nir Oz, Kfar Azza and other kibbutzim near the Gaza perimeter.

Atzmon said he wants Netanyahu, who is on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust, out of the office – the sooner the better. “He should have resigned on the 7th of October. I wanted to wake up on the 8th and watch him on TV telling people ‘I have failed you and I’m sorry. I’m stepping down,’ but that didn’t happen,” he said, adding that he would have welcomed nearly anyone else in the role.

Studying to become a social worker, Atzmon is passionate about his political beliefs. Yet as a soldier, he has fought shoulder to shoulder with people whose opinions couldn’t be further from his own.

Military service is mandatory for all Jewish citizens and for male Druze and Circassian citizens of Israel. Arab citizens and ultra-orthodox Jews are exempt from service, although they may choose to join.

The strict conscription laws mean the military is politically as diverse as Israeli society. People who wouldn’t cross paths otherwise are suddenly thrust together and forced to overcome their differences.

Emmanuel, a 35-year-old reservist currently serving in a combat unit in and around the Gaza Strip, is as passionately right-wing as Atzmon is left-wing.

Unlike Atzmon, Emmanuel is still on active duty and is officially prohibited from speaking to journalists. He has therefore asked CNN not to publish his full name.

He believes Israel will need to control Gaza for years to come, agreeing with Netanyuahu who said he wants Israel to have “overall security responsibility” in the strip for an “indefinite period” after the war ends

Emmanuel said the West Bank could serve as a blueprint for the future of Gaza. The fact that he refers to the area by its biblical name and ancient Israelite kingdoms – “Judea and Samaria” – is just a small reminder that in this region of divisions and complexities, the words one chooses speak volumes of one’s convictions.

Using the biblical name of the ancient homeland of the Jewish people is one way the Israeli government tries to legitimize Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, which are considered illegal under international law.

Atzmon, on the other hand, calls it the West Bank and says he is “very sure” that it is under occupation.

“[The Palestinians] should control their own area like they do in (some parts) of Judea and Samaria, but where Israel has access to every village and every city,” Emmanuel told CNN in a phone interview, speaking from his base near the Gaza Strip. “If we want to enter Ramallah, it is not a problem. We enter Ramallah, we neutralize the threat.”

Some of Netanyahu’s coalition partners are going a step further, proposing to [build Jewish settlements in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/17/middleeast/israel-far-right-gaza-settler-movement-cmd-intl/index.html).

The issue of Jewish settlements in the West Bank is already a major fault line within Israeli society and in the country’s diplomatic relationships. The idea of building settlements in Gaza has alarmed Israel’s allies, with the United States’ top diplomat rebuking the plans.

Netanyahu himself has so far rejected the idea of new settlements in Gaza as “unrealistic,” saying in an English-language statement that “Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza or displacing its civilian population.”

But Emmanuel supports that idea.

“We must establish new settlements. Not because we want to wipe out the Palestinians. No. We must have a real clear win over our enemies that everybody will understand. This is the price that you pay if you mess with us,” he said.    
   
Over 1.9 million people in Gaza, or nearly 85% of the population, are estimated to be internally displaced, according to the United Nations. Efforts to force them put of their homes permanently would be a breach of international law – and are among the arguments presented by South Africa in its ICJ case against Israel.    
   
“And the second reason is security. We know from Judea and Samaria that it’s easier to control the security in the area if you have settlements there,” he said.

The divisions and arguments within the Israeli society over the future of Gaza and the West Bank have become even deeper and more heated since the October 7 attacks.

Not everyone gets involved, however.

For 19-year-old combat soldier Mendel, the political disagreements seem a bit meaningless at this point.

“The politics … it really doesn’t matter. You’re in the army and you’re there to protect the people and protect each other. And it doesn’t matter what you think, or what you look like or where you’re from,” he told CNN in an interview at a Jerusalem retreat center run by Never Alone, an organization that provides support to “lone soldiers” without family in Israel.

An American from Long Island, Mendel decided to join the IDF after living in Israel for a few years.

Unlike Emmanuel and Atzmon, Mendel does not have previous military experience. He was drafted just a few months before the war broke out and has since been deployed to Gaza as part of the Netzah Yehuda Battalion – an IDF unit that is specifically designed to accommodate religious servicemen. He has also asked CNN not to publish his full name due to his active service.

He said that when being drafted, he didn’t think he would be involved in a war. But things have changed on October 7, he said.    
   
“They are still holding hostages there. What do you want us to do? If we back out and they still have our hostages? What would you do if that was you? What would you want your family doing if that was you?”

**Difficult conversations**

According to the IDF, 224 Israeli troops have been killed in Gaza since the ground operation began in late October.

Among them, Atzmon said, was his best friend, who was killed in a battle in southern Gaza in late December.

Atzmon told CNN the two had many conversations about the war and the civilians caught up in it — something he regards as part of their duty as soldiers.

“It’s our obligation to think about it and discuss it because the distance between fighting for your loved ones and killing people for revenge is really, really small,” he said during an interview in Jerusalem on Wednesday, just a few days after returning from his deployment.

He said he believes that individual soldiers and the military in general must continually have conversations about what is proportionate force.

“Because if we’re not, if we’re entering Gaza and doing whatever we want out of pure revenge, then we’re going to be as bad as Hamas. And we’re not. I am not going to let them turn me into a murderer,” he said.

But many outside Israel argue the limits of proportionality have been crossed. In an unprecedented display of coordinated dissent, more than 800 officials from the United States and Europe signed a scathing criticism of [Western policy](https://cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/palestinian-americans-skip-blinken-meeting-gaza/index.html) towards Israel and [Gaza](https://cnn.com/2024/01/30/middleeast/famine-looms-in-gaza-israel-war-intl/index.html), accusing their governments of possible complicity in war crimes.

Emmanuel said he too sympathizes with innocent civilians. But he said he believes fighting the war the way it is currently conducted is the only option.

He said that successive Israeli governments were wrong to believe that keeping Gaza sealed off and under blockade would “manage” the situation.

“I don’t believe that Churchill or Roosevelt thought they can manage Hitler. There’s no managing your enemies. Either we let them wipe out our country or we defeat them,” he said. “And to be clear, we are not at war with the Palestinian people in Gaza. Our war is with Hamas. Nobody wants to kill an innocent civilian, an innocent woman, an innocent child – but if we have to fight a war, there are casualties. ”

Mendel, by far the youngest of the trio, said he feels strongly about the “horrible” injustice of innocent people dying.

“Wars shouldn’t happen, (Hamas) should not have started this and none of this would have happened,” he said. “And I don’t think that starting it justifies any civilians dying, but it’s a war and war is a horrible, brutal thing, but it’s either that or they would have massacred the rest of us with smiles on their faces.”

Most of all, he said he just wants the war to end. He said he misses his family, his mom especially.

“She is the best of all,” he said. “And she makes the best challah in the world,” he added, referring to the traditional Jewish braided bread served on special occasions.

Mendel has some two years left of his military service. Whether the war will end by the time he finishes is anyone’s guess.

More than 800 officials from the United States and Europe have signed a scathing criticism of [Western policy](https://cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/palestinian-americans-skip-blinken-meeting-gaza/index.html) towards Israel and [Gaza](https://cnn.com/2024/01/30/middleeast/famine-looms-in-gaza-israel-war-intl/index.html), accusing their governments of possible complicity in war crimes.

In a statement obtained by CNN, the officials say there is a “plausible risk that our governments’ policies are contributing to grave violations of international humanitarian law, war crimes and even ethnic cleansing or genocide.”

They accuse their governments of failing to hold Israel to the same standards they apply to other countries and weakening their own “moral standing” in the world.

Among them are around 80 United States officials and diplomats, a source told CNN.

In an unprecedented display of coordinated dissent since Israel’s war against Hamas began nearly four months ago, the signatories call on their governments to “use all leverage” to secure a ceasefire and to stop saying that there is a “a strategic and defensible rationale behind the Israeli operation.”

The public letter, released Friday, comes a week after the [International Court of Justice](https://cnn.com/2024/01/26/middleeast/israel-genocide-case-icj-hague-ruling-south-africa-intl/index.html) (ICJ) found in a preliminary ruling that that South Africa had a right to pursue its genocide case against Israel, and that Palestinians had a right to be protected from genocide. While it has not yet ruled on whether Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, the ICJ said that “at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible.” It ordered Israel to “take all measures” to limit the death and destruction caused by its military campaign, prevent and punish incitement to genocide, and ensure access to humanitarian aid.

The statement “shows the depths of concerns and outrage and just horror that all of us are witnessing,” a US official with more than 25 years’ experience, who signed the letter, told CNN on Friday.

“The talking points that keep being delivered day after day are not cutting it.”

The US official told CNN that the signatories were motivated by their shared experience of having their concerns be ignored by their governments and by “the appropriateness” of public dissent by civil servants when ignored internally.

The official added that the ICJ’s decision to hear a genocide case lodged against Israel was validation for the authors’ concerns. Israel has strenuously denied accusations of genocide in Gaza.

“What was really important for those of us on the US side was to link arms with the people in Europe who believe their governments are following the US lead, and feel constrained by that,” the official said. “So we thought it was important that US officials continue to make clear their concerns with government policy on this.” The statement, which does not list its signatories, says that it was “coordinated” by civil servants in European Union institutions, The Netherlands, and the United States, and endorsed by civil servants in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Despite the letter not listing its authors, the US official told CNN many colleagues feared losing their jobs, and that the lower number of US signatories reflected stronger protections for official dissents in Europe.

CNN has asked the U.S. State Department, the European Union, and the Dutch Foreign Ministry for a response to the statement. CNN has also reached out to the Israeli government for a response.

A senior British civil servant told CNN of the letter: “We feel that politicians have responded to the evolving situation, evinced by the Foreign Secretary’s words this week.”

The Dutch Foreign Ministry, in a statement to CNN, said that while civil servants are entitled to freedom of expression, they are subject to some limitations under Dutch law.

“It is only natural that the debate in society about the conflict between Israel and Hamas also exists within our ministry. We feel that there should be scope for this debate and we encourage staff to enter into dialogues internally. And these dialogues are taking place.”

**‘We are obliged to do everything in our power’**

In the letter, the officials say that they raised concerns internally within their governments and institutions, but their professional concerns have often been overruled “by political and ideological considerations.”

“We are obliged to do everything in our power on behalf of our countries and ourselves to not be complicit in one of the worst human catastrophes of this century,”

Israel’s policies, they argue, are counterproductive to its own national security goals.

“Israel’s military operations have disregarded all important counterterrorism expertise gained since 9/11; and that the operation has not contributed to Israel’s goal of defeating Hamas and instead has strengthened the appeal of Hamas, Hezbollah and other negative actors.”

They say that Western support for Israel has come “without real conditions or accountability.”

“Our governments’ current policies weaken their moral standing and undermine their ability to stand up for freedom, justice, and human rights globally and weaken our efforts to rally international support for Ukraine and to counter malign actions by Russia, China and Iran,” they say.

Finally, they call on their governments to “develop a strategy for lasting peace that includes a secure Palestinian state and guarantees for Israel’s security, so that an attack like 7 October and an offensive on Gaza never happen again.”

US policy in the Middle East can no longer be described as an attempt to stop [the Israel-Gaza conflict](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-29-24/index.html) from triggering a bigger regional war. That hope died weeks ago.

The critical task now for President Joe Biden — as [he mulls retaliation](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/biden-jordan-attack-response-options/index.html) over the deaths of [three Americans](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/us-identifies-three-soldiers-killed-in-attack-in-jordan/index.html) in an attack by suspected Iranian proxy forces in Jordan Sunday – is to prevent that region-wide war from tipping out of control.

[The president told reporters on Tuesday](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/politics/biden-jordan-attack-response/index.html) that he had made a decision on how to respond to the attack and warned he held Tehran responsible “in the sense that they’re supplying the weapons to the people who did it.” But expressing the balancing act he faces in seeking to punish the perpetrators, downgrade their capabilities and restore deterrence, he added: “I don’t think we need a wider war in the Middle East. That’s not what I’m looking for.”

But it is indisputable that the United States is already embroiled in a war in the wider Middle East, less than three years after Biden officially decreed the end of a two-decade-long combat mission in Iraq that exhausted the US and caused deep political trauma.

It is also clear that the Biden administration’s effort to prevent an escalation is not working. US strikes against Iranian-backed militia throughout the region, which followed more than 160 attacks on American military facilities, did not deter Sunday’s drone strike. And missile and drone attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea haven’t stopped despite rolling US airstrikes against their launch sites and infrastructure in Yemen.

Ad Feedback

So Biden has now arrived at the unenviable position that presidents often face when all potential options before them are bad and the very task of seeking to slow a deepening crisis may end up exacerbating it.

The catalogue of violence that has erupted outside Gaza – where tens of thousands of Palestinians have been killed after 1,200 Israelis died in Hamas terror attacks on October 7 – underscores the grave potential of the war.

— Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian group based in Lebanon, has been waging a low-grade war against Israel. On Monday alone, it said it had launched 13 attacks on targets in northern Israel. The Israel Defense Forces said that evening it carried out airstrikes on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.

— Two months of Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping have disrupted global supply chains and raised the cost of the cargo trade, risking a major economic impact. The US is leading a coalition of nations to protect trade.

— The US and Britain launched strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen this month and Washington has carried out multiple follow-ups. But even Biden has admitted that the strategy has not stopped Houthi attacks.

— The US also launched strikes against targets linked to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria.

— The Biden administration has also carried out attacks on Iran-backed groups in Iraq, severely straining relations with the Baghdad government and raising concerns that US troops in the country to fight terrorism could be asked to leave.

— Israel expanded its own war by carrying out a drone strike that killed a senior Hamas leader in Beirut, according to US officials, fueling tensions in Lebanon – a nation beset by severe economic, political and security crises.

— Iran has blamed Israel for an attack that killed a number of Revolutionary Guard officers in Damascus, Syria.

If there is an upside to this spiraling military activity it’s that, as serious as it is, it’s unfolding as a set of controlled escalations that has yet to acquire its own destructive momentum. Some worst-case scenarios haven’t occurred — for example, a massive onslaught of missile attacks by Hezbollah against Israeli cities. The group has a far greater capacity to hurt Israel than Hamas does.

And while the weekend attack that killed the three Americans is tragic for their families and their nation, there has not so far been a large-scale attack on US interests — for instance, catastrophic damage to a US naval ship with huge loss of life — that could multiply the intensity of the conflict on multiple fronts. The calibrated escalations have fueled an impression in Washington that Iran doesn’t want a full-scale regional conflagration any more than its arch-enemy the United States does.

But if the progression of the conflict has been steady, rather than sudden, it’s not a given that it will stay that way.

“I think it’s very important to note that this is an incredibly volatile time in the Middle East,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday, before adding: “I would argue that we have not seen a situation as dangerous as the one we’re facing now across the region since at least 1973, and arguably even before that.”

Aaron David Miller, who spent years as a Middle East peace negotiator for presidents of both parties, is even less hopeful. He told CNN’s Jim Acosta on Sunday: “It’s going to get worse before it gets worse, I suspect.”

**Biden’s impossible choices**

As the country absorbed the loss of Sgt. William Rivers, 46, Specialist Kennedy Sanders, 24, and Specialist Breonna Moffett, 23, on Monday, Biden shared on social media a photo of him in the Situation Room after receiving a national security briefing.

He doesn’t lack for advice outside the White House. Hawkish Republicans like South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham are demanding he attack Iran on Iranian soil. GOP presidential candidate Nikki Haley says he should target leaders of the IRGC. Biden’s likely 2024 election foe Donald Trump is simultaneously blasting Biden as weak and accusing him of dragging the US into another Middle Eastern quagmire. The ex-president is not that different from some progressives in voicing that fear. Also on the left, however, is dismay from some at Biden’s refusal to demand a ceasefire in Gaza.

Rep. Jim Himes, the top Democrat on the House Select Committee on Intelligence, said on CNN’s “The Lead” Monday that Iran understood that there was always the risk of fatalities when its proxies attacked US bases. “A lot of us have spent time thinking what happens when there are fatalities and now we are in that world,” said the Connecticut lawmaker. “(The) response is going to be important and hopefully calibrated to send a very strong signal without increasing dramatically the odds that we get into a shooting war with Iran.”

Many politicians, experts and commentators have repeatedly speculated about the options in the last 24 hours, often citing the idea that the US needs to send a tough message but must also avoid sending the conflict into an even worse place. But one lesson from the last few months, and indeed the disastrous last 20 years of US policy in the Middle East, is that formulations and assumptions that make sense in Washington rarely play out as anyone expects in that treacherous region.

This is why Biden’s dilemma is so acute. How exactly does he find the sweet spot between deterrence and disastrous escalation? Will the reprisals he does take put US forces at even greater risk? Or will Iran just ignore them? Whenever a president takes military action, they must consider what’s next — not just how an adversary will respond immediately but in months to come and how the US is prepared to counter those reactions.

US officials told CNN’s Oren Liebermann, Natasha Bertrand and Katie Bo Lillis Monday that the American response was likely to be more powerful than previous US strikes in Iraq and Syria against Iranian interests, but they have suggested it is unlikely the US will strike within Iran. Blinken on Monday predicted the US response would be “multileveled, come in stages and be sustained over time.”

If there is one ray of light right now, it’s Monday’s news that a broad framework for a hostage release and potential ceasefire in the war in Gaza has been presented to Hamas. The emerged from proposals from Israel, Hamas, Qatar and Egypt along with additional ideas from the United States. It could see a six-week pause in the conflict, the freeing of civilian hostages in Gaza and corresponding releases of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Despite some reservations from Israel and tough details still pending, one official told CNN’s Alex Marquardt, “I sense optimism.”

Such a critical diplomatic moment only raises the stakes for Biden not to upset things as he mulls his military options.

**The political context**

Biden’s decision making cannot be divorced from the political context at home. No president can afford to look like he’s lost control when US troops are dead. This is especially the case for Biden with accusations of weakness at the heart of Trump’s 2024 case against his successor.

GOP critics have long accused Biden of appeasing the Islamic Republic and see recent events as the result. “The only answer to these attacks must be devastating military retaliation against Iran’s terrorist forces, both in Iran and across the Middle East. Anything less will confirm Joe Biden as a coward unworthy of being commander-in-chief,” said Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton.

Haley called on Biden to directly take aim at the IRGC leadership. “Find one or two of them that are making the decisions. It will chill all of them when you do that,” the former US ambassador to the United Nations said on Newsmax.

The rationale for attacking Iran would be that incremental and calibrated attacks on Iranian proxies haven’t worked and that Iran is a mortal threat to the United States and its allies and could only be deterred by direct military action. Still, the lesson from Trump’s assassination of Iranian intelligence chef Qasem Soleimani in 2020 is that it didn’t prevent Iran from expanding its regional threat. Indeed the network of proxies threatening the US and its allies were the brainchild of Soleimani. And Trump didn’t dare to strike him inside Iran. The attack took place in Baghdad.

There’s no sign the US will attack Iranian soil. The White House’s top national security spokesman John Kirby told reporters repeatedly on Monday the US has no interest in a war with Iran or its clerical regime. And the consequences of American strikes on Iran would likely be so escalatory — probably unleashing Tehran proxies like Hezbollah with full bore attacks on Israeli and US interests and a consequential major US-Iran war — that it’s an unthinkable possibility. It’s easy for Republicans – especially those like Haley, whose path to the White House looks dim — to advise hitting Iran. It’s Biden who will be responsible for the fallout. And on a purely strategic level, risking a major Middle East war that could cause massive US casualties to avenge the deaths of three soldiers, as terrible as their deaths are, would not represent a sound equation.

While Beltway pundits speculated about sinking Iran’s navy or targeting its leadership, the most likely outcome is a range of punishing attacks against the capabilities of its proxies on a scale not yet seen.

But Biden still must wrestle with this unanswerable question: How does he assert US power in a widening regional war in a way that doesn’t make the conflict even more dangerous, expansive and likely to careen out of control?

[President Joe Biden](http://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/joe-biden-news) issued an executive order targeting violent Israeli settlers in the West Bank whom he has said have undermined stability in the area, a US official and source familiar with the matter told CNN.

The new directive, first reported by [Politico](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/01/biden-executive-order-israel-palestine-00139023) and expected to be announced Thursday, will impose sanctions on several individuals accused of having participated in the violent acts.

The order targets four individuals accused of directly perpetrating violence or intimidation in the West Bank, a senior administration official said, including people accused of initiating and leading a riot; setting buildings, fields and vehicles on fire; assaulting civilians and damaging property.

The State Department announced the names of the Israelis targeted by the executive order, which blocks their financial assets and bars them from coming to the US. They are David Chai Chasdai, Einan Tanjil, Shalom Zicherman and Yinon Levi.

The White House notified the Israeli government of their plans ahead of the order, an official said.

Ad Feedback

Officials said they had compiled evidence they said offered proof of the individuals’ role in the West Bank violence that would withstand judicial review, including information from public reporting.

Chasdai, according to the State Department, “initiated and led a riot, which involved setting vehicles and buildings on fire, assaulting Palestinian civilians, and causing damage to property in Huwara, which resulted in the death of a Palestinian civilian.”

Tanjil “was involved in assaulting Palestinian farmers and Israeli activists by attacking them with stones and clubs, resulting in injuries that required medical treatment,” according to a State Department fact sheet.

Zicherman, “according to video evidence, assaulted Israeli activists and their vehicles in the West Bank, blocking them on the street, and attempted to break the windows of passing vehicles with activists inside.” He cornered two activists, injuring both of them, according to the State Department.

Levi “led a group of settlers who engaged in actions creating an atmosphere of fear in the West Bank,” according to the fact sheet.

“He regularly led groups of settlers from the Meitarim Farm outpost that assaulted Palestinian and Bedouin civilians, threatened them with additional violence if they did not leave their homes, burned their fields, and destroyed their property,” it said. Levi “and other settlers at Meitarim Farm have repeatedly attacked multiple communities within the West Bank.”

It’s not clear when each of these acts occurred. The US has no plans to target Israeli government officials for sanctions, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters Thursday.

Biden has condemned these acts of violence in the past, and the issue is one that the president has personally discussed in recent months with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu’s office said in a statement Thursday that the sanctions were unnecessary.

“Israel acts against all lawbreakers everywhere, so there is no room for exceptional measures in this regard,” the prime minister’s office said, adding that “the absolute majority” of Israeli settlers in the West Bank “are law-abiding citizens.”

The order comes as the president faces backlash from key parts of his political coalition for his backing of Israel in its war against Hamas in Gaza. While the order is not expected to address the situation in Gaza, it will mark one of the more significant actions Biden has taken to critique Israel since the war began in the wake of the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas and could be a signal from Biden toward Muslim and Arab-American voters who are upset with his refusal to call for a ceasefire.

[In December](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/politics/blinken-visa-restrictions-extremists-west-bank/index.html), Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced a new policy to prevent extremist Israeli settlers responsible for violence in the West Bank from coming to the United States.

The State Department can apply the policy to both Israelis and Palestinians who were responsible for attacks in the West Bank, Blinken said at the time.

Ultimately, the new policy is expected “to impact dozens of individuals and potentially their family members,” State Department spokesperson Matt Miller said at the time.

Settler violence against West Bank residents has been a primary flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since long before the October 7 Hamas attack. When hundreds of Israeli settlers rampaged through the West Bank town of Huwara last February, the [ensuing violence was so brutal](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/15/middleeast/huwara-west-bank-settler-attack-cmd-intl/index.html) that the Israeli military commander over the West Bank referred to it as a “pogrom.”

The violence has sharpened since October 7, along with the [fears of Palestinians](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/middleeast/west-bank-settler-attacks-israel-cmd-intl/index.html) that they would be subjected to revenge attacks. [Dozens of Palestinians were killed in the West Bank](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/middleeast/west-bank-settler-attacks-israel-cmd-intl/index.html) in the weeks immediately following the Hamas attack as settler violence intensified.

An estimated [700,000 Israeli settlers](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/middleeast/west-bank-settler-attacks-israel-cmd-intl/index.html) live in the West Bank. It’s unclear which specific acts those targeted by Biden’s executive order participated in.

Biden has raised the issue of settler violence in “almost every diplomatic conversation he has with Israeli leaders,” a senior administration official said.

“These actions pose a grave threat to peace, security and stability in the West Bank, Israel, and the Middle East region, and they also obstruct the realization, ultimately, of an independent Palestinian state existing side by side with Israel, and by extension the enduring peace and stability for Palestinians and Israelis alike,” the official said.

Speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast on Capitol Hill Thursday morning, ahead of issuing the executive order, Biden acknowledged the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians. He said he understands the “pain and passion felt by so many here in America and around the world” in response to the “trauma, the destruction in Israel and Gaza.”

“We value and pray for the lives taken and for the families left behind,” Biden said. “For all those who are living in dire circumstances, innocent men, women and children, held hostage or under bombardment, or displaced not knowing where the next meal will come from, or if it will come at all.”

As of early this week, the overall death toll in Gaza since October 7 had risen to 26,422 with 65,087 injured, according to the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza. More than 1,200 people were killed in the original Hamas attack on Israel and more than 200 were taken hostage.

“Not only do we pray for peace,” he continued, “we’re actively working for peace, security and dignity for the Israeli people and the Palestinian people.”

Biden said he was engaged in bringing hostages held by Hamas home “day and night,” and was also working to “ease the humanitarian crisis and to bring peace to Gaza and Israel and enduring peace with two states for two peoples.”

Israel will begin pulling thousands of soldiers out of Gaza this week in preparation for a new phase of the conflict, the military announced Monday, though a top official warned that he expected the fighting to continue throughout the year.

The announcement from the Israel Defense Forces marked the biggest known withdrawal of troops from the territory since the war against Hamas began and comes after the military said it was expanding operations in the central and southern Gaza Strip.

A senior US official said Monday that the move shows signs of the country’s gradual shift to a lower-intensity phase of its war.

The 551st and 14th brigades – comprised of reservists – will return to their families and civilian lives this week, the IDF said in a statement.

The 828th brigade, which trains squad commanders; the 261st brigade, which trains army officers; and the 460th brigade, which trains the armored corps, will return to their scheduled training, the IDF said.

The statement said the move is expected to “significantly alleviate economic burdens” and the troops “to gather strength for upcoming activities in the next year, as the fighting will persist, and their services will still be needed.”

In a briefing on Sunday, IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said the return of the reservists was aimed at ensuring “planning and preparation for the continuation of 2024… understanding that we will be required for additional tasks and warfare throughout this year.” The objectives of the war “[require prolonged fighting,](https://www.idf.il/168422)” he added.

The focus of Israel’s ground operation has moved to the center and south of the Strip, but fighting in the north continues, where [an estimated 52% to 65%](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/middleeast/map-humanitarian-aid-water-power-hospitals-gaza-strip-dg/) of structures have been damaged and 46,000 housing units completely destroyed, according to the UN.

The [IDF extended operations further](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-29-23/h_2b51b080e5cefc6f4b519206fbfaeb64) into Khan Younis in southern Gaza last week. The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) warned on Thursday that over 150,000 people “have nowhere to go” after the IDF warned residents in many parts of central Gaza that they must urgently leave.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Saturday that Israel’s war in Gaza is at its “highest level and will continue for months,” according to Israel’s Army Radio.

Senior US officials [told CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/politics/israel-ground-operation-us-warnings/index.html) in early December that they expected the current phase of Israel’s ground operation targeting the southern end of the Strip to last several weeks before it transitions, possibly by January, to a lower-intensity, hyper-localized strategy that narrowly targets specific Hamas militants and leaders.

The US has been pressing Israeli officials to begin the more surgical phase of fighting. The Biden administration has warned Israel that it cannot replicate the kind of devastating tactics it used in the north and must do more to limit civilian casualties.

More than 21,000 people have been killed in the enclave during Israel’s offensive, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza.

A US official said Monday’s announcement appeared to reflect the start of a gradual shift to lower intensity operations in the north of Gaza that American officials had been encouraging.

The official said the move reflected the success IDF forces have had in Northern Gaza in dismantling Hamas military capabilities. Still, the official cautioned there was still fighting ongoing in the north and that it did not appear to reflect any changes in the south of Gaza.

US officials are viewing the next few weeks as a critical period that will demonstrate Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s willingness to move to a lower intensity phase of going after Hamas in Gaza.

Later this week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is expected to travel to the Middle East to continue discussions with Israeli officials about the next phase of the war in Gaza, which American officials have made clear they expect to begin soon.

With every passing day, we learn ever more [horrifying details](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/52eaeea84ccf4bf3404455ef92c5ba1acc2a5a3b?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F40bbb34ef08f424d5dc5b195315f4544f856a03a%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2023*2F10*2F10*2Fmiddleeast*2Fisrael-kibbutzim-kfar-aza-beeri-urim-hamas-attack-intl*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D817fb5d04270785d__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWRhGhtmng%24&userId=3243276&signature=5c119b9f989e4f5c) of what [Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/world/israelis-returning-home-hamas-attack-intl/index.html) has perpetrated against Israeli civilians since last Saturday. Now that our notion of what can happen in this troubled corner of the world has been shaken, proving that the inconceivable can become reality, questions loom. Among them: Is there a way to defy the odds in a different way, with an outcome to this conflict that overcomes enormous political and diplomatic obstacles to create more durable stability? And, to that end, is there a way to prevent Iran from emerging as the victor in this terrible war?At this moment, the focus in Israel is on military and other security operations. But behind the scenes, with a view toward what happens in the longer term, there’s a pivotal role for diplomats and political leaders in the region and beyond.

The agenda of Israel, the US and the international community (after [persuading Egypt](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/f9d1eda55bbc2a741036cc727b7166e8caee0500?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2023%2F10%2F12%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Fgaza-egypt-israel-strikes.html&userId=3243276&signature=df92a9d2a81cfe55) to open the border to Gaza civilians so they can flee the fighting) should include three extraordinarily difficult goals to start building a safer, more stable aftermath to the fighting: healing the acrimony dividing Israelis, making progress in relations with Palestinian factions that are not opposed to living side by side with Israel and salvaging the [normalization process](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/717afc20d8dbb99d2c5cb950b26683bcad55ab85?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F09%2F22%2Fmiddleeast%2Fisrael-benjamin-netanyahu-cnn-interview-intl%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=f0e4951ba8396c11) between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Achieving these would make the entire world more secure.

These goals may seem out of reach, perhaps even impossible. But, as Israel’s first prime minister David Ben-Gurion once noted, “…in order to be a realist you must [believe in miracles](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/f89c75de52cdd1386cf1ff190ed9a4b9e3d2d50a?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F1387645cd18aa640ed651c4b6ec74e0d2f879c9b%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.beth-israel.org*2Frabbi-lyons-blog-7_19_2019*2F%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D9cc512b3ae39c8c0__%3BJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWTWfZhhZg%24&userId=3243276&signature=d1e9006abfd97cf1).”

We already know many of the losers in this terrible conflict: the thousands of Israeli victims slaughtered and terrorized by Hamas; the civilians in Gaza once [again trapped](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/59a9ca684bf6462747ec593f3c38e4a1ea74c9c7?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F15cc1e86946ad146f1abb8b98809e2338de9a867%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2023*2F10*2F11*2Fpolitics*2Fus-talks-safe-passage-gaza*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3Df5a11824b7521caf__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWTBpRIdkQ%24&userId=3243276&signature=a80b2b4227c99ea5) as human shields; the peace activists, whose foes will argue this latest violence proves that peace is impossible; and the politicians and military leaders who will face a [furious reckoning](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/5e27d0582c9d1dfcce03d126a036f962623592b1?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F7829844ce84504fe7b406e8edd436170138cc47a%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.haaretz.com*2Fisrael-news*2F2023-10-08*2Fty-article*2F.premium*2Fnetanyahus-recklessness-has-brought-war-upon-israel*2F0000018b-0b9f-dae9-adcb-abbf348c0000%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D4a591da325d6864f__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWSGfIVOSA%24&userId=3243276&signature=03e787998aaa8079) when this is over.

But who will be the winner?

The goals of terrorism are political, and the political ramifications of this conflict are global. The United States may want to [pivot away](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/580995a058442cb11da798cf9d82a6842128e7a2?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F10%2F10%2Fpolitics%2Fpolitical-shockwaves-israel-hamas-war%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=ec8c2ccd1d22e87e) from the Middle East, but the Middle East refuses to play along.

Iran, which for years has supported Hamas with [money and weapons](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/dee6d27d6c057662b6cd11d5bea3604fc87127d0?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F10%2F09%2Fmiddleeast%2Fhamas-iran-israel-attack-analysis-intl%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=5a271b906f998497), has a strong stake in how this plays out in the weeks, months and even years ahead. So far, neither the US nor Israel have found direct evidence linking [Tehran](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/0756824c6e83b628fb3416e3800241c1da7ddcf8?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F10%2F10%2Fpolitics%2Fus-intelligence-search-evidence-iran-direct-role-hamas-attack-israel%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=d2b8945fa4ba6a04) to the attack, but the White House has described Iran as “[broadly complicit](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/12b35c24cedfc10d44933b19b02132295ca54828?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F00a790bc89d14c7c37975ef2db925edf7938eddd%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.washingtonpost.com*2Fnational-security*2F2023*2F10*2F09*2Firan-support-hamas-training-weapons-israel*2F%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D3680c5085a26b873__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWSBWgEXzw%24&userId=3243276&signature=8dbe796ef4a38b97)” as a full-fledged sponsor of Hamas. Israel and the US are being circumspect, because if they do find a smoking gun, if they make the accusation, that could amount to a casus belli, a justification for war, and they don’t want another head-on confrontation at this moment. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised Hamas for the operation but, perhaps betraying some anxiety, [publicly denied](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/fda7f75967a6635d536a85de7eb34b1367f012de?url=https%3A%2F%2Fedition.cnn.com%2Fmiddleeast%2Flive-news%2Fisrael-hamas-war-gaza-10-10-23%2Fh_7dcdbb4ff46d60b43549b99df2465a86&userId=3243276&signature=7cd550355a482988) involvement in the attacks.

And yet, this war could end up turning into a triumph for Tehran, a fervently fundamentalist, anti-Western dictatorship that has threatened to destroy Israel and has worked [to encircle it](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/b47f88e0e7c7f9298334cd78b86c0b78efb58cf1?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2Fe8dd164a8284aee62777c2be8ff2bd97511745fe%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.semafor.com*2Farticle*2F10*2F08*2F2023*2Fhow-hamass-attack-on-israel-could-spark-a-wider-mideast-war%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D5eebbbd769009510__%3BJSUlJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWRK0hDXVw%24&userId=3243276&signature=f1b7bbae512d0445) with a ring of militant organizations in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, all the while [depriving its own people](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/8358bd61979e90cb98c012e419ce6a63934ac981?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F21e59c05ea84504cfd10ebf0d6c003b2f77a0de8%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2Finteractive*2F2023*2F02*2Fmiddleeast*2Firan-torture-jails-black-sites-mahsa-amini-protests-cmd-intl*2F%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3Dfd3862b949f9c26c__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWSWCugfEw%24&userId=3243276&signature=a674d405e8f770bc) of many basic rights.

The goals of Hamas, whose founding charter commits it to the [destruction of Israel](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/99a75b38beddee8e4eb1fc4dcc229b6e406ce3a3?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F3fee72fd27beba1ea1b76e0a651ad809631b3dd1%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Favalon.law.yale.edu*2F20th_century*2Fhamas.asp%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3Dcdfe2f4dc7130230__%3BJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWTwUcZfxg%24&userId=3243276&signature=eb0a764b99c9dc96), [align neatly with those of Iran’s](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/94a3a33f2934d88c4552c93945e44595fd3632ed?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2Fe66b324235dae637f364d18a59adf0a38201f8f4%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.theatlantic.com*2Fideas*2Farchive*2F2022*2F07*2Fjoe-biden-middle-east-israel-iran*2F670530*2F%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D9d661bb04100ffa2__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUlJQ!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWQLK9oKpA%24&userId=3243276&signature=1dedfd33a06200be) theocracy. Both Iran and the Palestinians have watched with alarm the [growing ties](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/292a7d13ccc94e68f08a7a6c01d936f165e492fe?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F6777b44f75561e535f5afdfde8b573db159d6351%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.uae-embassy.org*2Fnews*2Fstatements-and-reactions-regarding-uae-israel-peace-accord%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D37e476c75cfd6475__%3BJSUlJSU!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWQJfogVOg%24&userId=3243276&signature=6b7fbe16ee83ffbc) between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Whatever the principal objective of Hamas’ operation, it’s reasonable to believe that derailing that process, particularly the prospect of [friendly ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/4228b41d7dbdf4a96343e7039a850d930aa37ac8?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2Fe9df0f39451b178124356bd66315dd66ab8e08e4%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2023*2F09*2F21*2Fmiddleeast*2Fsaudi-arabia-mbs-interview-fox-intl*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D4f9d480584e01d94__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWQSLNytDQ%24&userId=3243276&signature=a3849294175fd796), entered the calculation.

The perpetrators undoubtedly expect an implacable reaction from Israel, which would help to derail the process, with images of Palestinians killed by Israeli bombs filling the screens of Arab citizens everywhere, sparking outrage and making it far more difficult, perhaps impossible, for the Saudis to draw closer to Israel. With Arab publics watching images of carnage in Gaza, the terrorist logic goes, it becomes politically impossible for Arab leaders to draw closer to Israel.

An end to the normalization process would be a victory for Iran, and a victory for Iran — now a member of the anti-American, anti-Western [axis of autocrats](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/d08460f7ab8f90df79c76da8598d9c0d5a86214a?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2Fa4452e6a0dd360f9c618bf21ed7629e2992fe7af%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2023*2F03*2F29*2Fpolitics*2Fchina-russia-iran-us-mark-milley-nuclear*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3Dd295b258d0f37ffa__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWQjcMprzA%24&userId=3243276&signature=4b5e09392b5e1152), alongside China and Russia — is the last thing the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia want

Iran and Saudi Arabia recently [established diplomatic relations](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/1d2906871df98362d46243e298673ced3368309e?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F03%2F15%2Fworld%2Fus-saudi-china-relations-intl%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=896b6d47b729a929), but the long-standing rivalry and mistrust between them, as the standard bearers of Islam’s two main divisions, Shiites and Sunnis, did not suddenly disappear.

If Riyadh were to announce that the talks with Israel are not dead, it would face strong blowback from many quarters, at home and abroad. But Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), is not exactly risk averse.

To ease the path for reconciliation with Saudi Arabia — and for other important reasons, including the promotion of stability at home, and the need to one day solve the conflict with Palestinians — Israeli leaders should be talking to Palestinians in the West Bank, probing the possibility of working together on a path forward. It all seems barely fathomable now, but it will be necessary.

Indeed, of the three difficult goals, this one may be the most difficult. MBS may be prepared to face popular anger, but the head of the Palestinian Authority, President Mahmoud Abbas, is not. Now in the [18th year of a four-year term](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/71bb02d87fdd1a1c56d6a2d7f6cf24fe9df4f34a?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F824d34e651dae625d01af179430189eedd1b2a0a%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.washingtonpost.com*2Fworld*2F2023*2F10*2F11*2Fisrael-gaza-war-abbas-pa*2F%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3Dbe3a4245593ef27f__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWQxASgzMw%24&userId=3243276&signature=a00e8b0ba8d2ca4f), he is deeply unpopular, his position tenuous.

Many Israelis, too, will bristle at the notion of compromise with Palestinians, after having seen their men, women, children, toddlers, babies and elders massacred, and not hearing any condemnation from the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

If Israel’s peace camp had already grown weaker over the years, Hamas has only made it more so.

But nothing has weakened Israel more than its internal divisions, which tore the country apart after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu brought into his coalition right-wing extremist figures — [the only way](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/5e72850b693c58c66b1afccae522a27e2815f064?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F7a8ee32b1d94aa32d1d65bef6856a1b94a1286b2%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2022*2F10*2F28*2Fmiddleeast*2Fnetanyahu-comeback-extremists-mime-intl*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D4aa1429e63639993__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWSmnZVkCg%24&userId=3243276&signature=992d0e26c28555fd) he could hold on to power. Interestingly, one of them, Itamar Ben-Gvir, was Israel’s minister of national security when the country was caught totally unprepared.

For months, Israelis had been [protesting against a judicial overhaul](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/8d01b18d65b32b7532784e5385f281c174c70b60?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F7b25279d72c24e46567280c1249693d47157d62c%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2023*2F07*2F22*2Fmiddleeast*2Fisrael-judiciary-protest-vote-intl*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3Dd6119977d9ed5e2d__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWQtpL8evA%24&userId=3243276&signature=ec41a49e36b9a657) — a judicial “coup,” as critics called it — promoted by Netanyahu’s ruling coalition, which would severely weaken checks and balances in the country, corroding its democratic underpinnings.

Iran and Saudi Arabia recently [established diplomatic relations](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/1d2906871df98362d46243e298673ced3368309e?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F03%2F15%2Fworld%2Fus-saudi-china-relations-intl%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=896b6d47b729a929), but the long-standing rivalry and mistrust between them, as the standard bearers of Islam’s two main divisions, Shiites and Sunnis, did not suddenly disappear.

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But nothing has weakened Israel more than its internal divisions, which tore the country apart after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu brought into his coalition right-wing extremist figures — [the only way](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/5e72850b693c58c66b1afccae522a27e2815f064?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F7a8ee32b1d94aa32d1d65bef6856a1b94a1286b2%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2022*2F10*2F28*2Fmiddleeast*2Fnetanyahu-comeback-extremists-mime-intl*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D4aa1429e63639993__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWSmnZVkCg%24&userId=3243276&signature=992d0e26c28555fd) he could hold on to power. Interestingly, one of them, Itamar Ben-Gvir, was Israel’s minister of national security when the country was caught totally unprepared.

For months, Israelis had been [protesting against a judicial overhaul](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/8d01b18d65b32b7532784e5385f281c174c70b60?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2F7b25279d72c24e46567280c1249693d47157d62c%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2023*2F07*2F22*2Fmiddleeast*2Fisrael-judiciary-protest-vote-intl*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3Dd6119977d9ed5e2d__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWQtpL8evA%24&userId=3243276&signature=ec41a49e36b9a657) — a judicial “coup,” as critics called it — promoted by Netanyahu’s ruling coalition, which would severely weaken checks and balances in the country, corroding its democratic underpinnings.

On Wednesday, in the midst of this crisis, the most serious one Israel has faced in decades, Netanyahu and former defense minister Benny Gantz announced an [emergency unity government](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/f96df11c2c18a12618e4157568b702aea5d1733f?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F__https%3A%2Fmailtrack.io%2Ftrace%2Flink%2Ff99870d1a638324a93330a333f7cd8f75368dd1a%3Furl%3Dhttps*3A*2F*2Fwww.cnn.com*2F2023*2F10*2F11*2Fmiddleeast*2Fisrael-gaza-hamas-war-wednesday-intl-hnk*2Findex.html%26userId%3D3243276%26signature%3D39bdf12df3f89647__%3BJSUlJSUlJSUl!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!kFqesVbE4PqOL03A8CO2ZbvJgJ4FLbXciXBCOHUrCwcgaGrYtYTW5UYcTrrTj2rsheU2vXcqpDfuRWSljRkc2w%24&userId=3243276&signature=2ef15101812f58a8). That’s the first step in bringing the country back together. But that road, too, is long and steep. Israelis face wrenching dilemmas, and they have [diametrically opposed views](https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/30188b9fd7b8c4f70548a241b386128300b93348?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.timesofisrael.com%2Fa-deeply-divided-israel-limps-toward-75th-birthday-under-weight-of-internal-divide%2F&userId=3243276&signature=2eb5c7df2a71e205) about how to solve them. If there’s something they surely all agree about today, it’s that those deep divisions made the country more vulnerable.

As the fighting rages on, the emotions are intense. Grief, anger, fear. But those whose job is to look beyond the immediate challenge, to consider the future beyond the crisis and look for ways to prevent it from returning in an even more devastating shape, must find a way to create a diplomatic and political miracle on the other side of the current nightmare

Israeli President Isaac Herzog spent his day on Friday meeting with high-profile leaders at [the COP28 climate talks](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/climate/king-charles-cop28-uae-investment-unsg-climate-intl/index.html) in Dubai. The same day, his country’s army dropped leaflets around southern Gaza, warning residents to flee — its combat operations against Hamas were resuming after a seven-day pause.

Herzog was supposed to give an address that day calling for action on the climate crisis. His slot came and went; he didn’t speak. He was instead meeting with [the likes of King Charles III](https://twitter.com/Isaac_Herzog) and leaders of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the European Union, the United Kingdom and India, as well as the United Nations Secretary General.

The discussions were private, but no doubt the top of Herzog’s agenda was soliciting support, or at least tolerance, for Israel’s part in the war with Hamas, and helping secure the release of the remaining 136 hostages who were abducted from Israel by the armed group in its October 7 attack. Since then, Israel has retaliated with enormous military might, in a war that has killed more children than all the conflicts around the world in a year put together.

The Israel-Hamas war is casting a shadow over the COP28 climate talks. Friday only marked Day 2 of proceedings, yet the subject has been unavoidable in press conferences, speeches and even in the optics of photos and handshakes.

Some participants walked around the summit venue wearing lanyards in the colors of the Palestinian flag. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa openly accused Israel of committing war crimes in formal speeches that were supposed to be about climate to thousands of delegates, in remarks publicized well beyond Dubai.

Meanwhile, Israel’s allies, like UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, repeated the line that Israel “has the right to defend itself.” Sunak met with at least four leaders about the war —  it’s unlikely he had much time left for climate.

It’s not surprising or even untoward that Herzog would spend his time at COP28 with influential leaders — there are few opportunities as awash with powerful players as the first two days of the UN-backed talks. But it is symbolic of an ongoing problem — the world struggles to make room for the drudging issue of climate change when conflicts happening in the now use up so much time, money and attention.

Already, the heat of the war has entered the talks. The Iranian delegations left the summit because Herzog and the Israeli delegation were present, according to Iranian state media IRNA. Iran doesn’t recognize Israel. It’s not clear if its delegation plans to return.

As 2023 is on track to be the hottest year on record, there is a growing sense of urgency that countries need to put aside their differences for the climate crisis — the consequences of feuding while the planet fries in record heat and crumbles from deadly extreme weather events are just too grim to ignore. The US and China, for example, [agreed to resume a climate working group](https://.cnn.com/2023/11/15/world/us-china-climate-announcement-summit-intl-hnk/index.html) last month and pledged a major ramp-up of renewable energy after a freeze since August last year.

But in reality, the scourges of conflict and climate change have become so intertwined — even horrifically similar in their outcomes — that addressing them together may be an inevitability.

That point was made clearly by Jordanian King Abdullah II, who in his speech Friday warned that war would only worsen the Middle East’s acute water stress and food insecurity, already fuelled by the climate crisis.

“My friends, this year’s conference of the parties must recognize even more than ever that we cannot talk about climate change in isolation from the humanitarian tragedies unfolding around us,” he said.

“As we speak, the Palestinian people are facing an immediate threat to their lives and well-being. In Gaza, over 1.7 million Palestinians have been displaced from their homes, tens of thousands have been injured or killed in a region already on the frontlines of climate change. The massive destruction of war makes these environmental threats of water scarcity and food insecurity even more severe.”

**North-South ‘trust deficit’**

The wider, longer-running Israel-Palestinian conflict has caused divisions globally along the lines of race, religion and ethnicity since the state of Israel was established in 1948. But at COP, the current war is also causing a Global North-South divide, according to Ulrich Eberle, Director of Climate, Environment and Conflict at the International Crisis Group, a Brussel’s-based think tank.

“The longstanding trust deficit between the US and the Global South has grown even deeper because of the Biden administration’s unstinting support for Israel’s Gaza campaign,” Eberle told CNN. “North-South conversation at COP was never going to be easy, but the timing and severity of the war certainly doesn’t help, and could distract attention from vital issues.”

In the early days of the war, US President Joe Biden was one of the most emphatic supporters of Israel and its right to defend itself. But his administration has been cornered into softening that tone, as gruesome images of the toll on civilians in Gaza draw outrage against Israel from many corners of the world.

The Middle East has long been wracked with conflict, but the climate crisis was one area that was helping repair old rifts. The UAE — a long-standing supporter of a Palestinian state — had recently begun cooperating with Israel on climate.

In 2021, Israel and the UAE signed a water for energy deal with Jordan that would involve an exchange of solar power for desalinated water. Last month, Jordan pulled out of the deal, with its foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, [telling Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/16/jordan-says-it-will-not-sign-energy-and-water-exchange-deal-with-israel) it couldn’t possibly ratify it “while Israel continues to kill children in Gaza.”

The question now is whether the heat of the war will leave the summit along with the world leaders — who typically fly home after making big, bold statements at the start of talks — or if two weeks of painstaking negotiations around the viability of our planet may just add to tensions among the war’s key players, and their allies and foes.

It’s early days, but so far, the actual negotiations haven’t been too clouded by the conflict, according to Alden Meyer, a senior associate with the climate consultancy E3G.

“But it’s one more geopolitical stress on top of what you already have with Ukraine and other tensions like US-China relations. And this has not been an easy space for a number of years, in terms of separating the need to act collectively on climate change, versus the conflicts in other arenas, whether it’s trade or vaccines or the debt crisis or armed conflict in a lot of parts of the world,” Alden told CNN.

“It’s not like this is a new dynamic, but it’s obviously a very intense issue right now.”

It should not be hard to categorically condemn Hamas terrorists’ depraved [use of rape as a weapon of war](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/17/world/israel-investigates-sexual-violence-hamas/index.html) against Israeli women and girls.

And the idea that Israel could think that a ratio of two civilians killed for every Hamas fighter in Gaza would be a [“tremendously positive” result](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/middleeast/israel-hamas-military-civilian-ratio-killed-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=Israel%20military%20says%202%20civilians,positive'%20ratio%20given%20combat%20challenges) is callous.

But raging disputes on both these issues underscore the extreme politicization of the conflict and, more importantly, threaten to downplay the inhumanity of a war exerting a horrific toll on defenseless civilians.

The first episode concerns Democratic Rep. Pramila Jayapal, who was forced on Tuesday to issue [a long statement](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/politics/pramila-jayapal-statement/index.html) walking back her comments to CNN’s Dana Bash on Sunday that “horrific” rapes [need to be “balanced”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/03/politics/rep-pramila-jayapal-argues-ceasefire-in-gaza-is-realistic-as-fighting-resumes/index.html) against civilian deaths in Gaza.

The second drama stems from comments by Israel Defense Forces spokesman Jonathan Conricus, also on CNN, about Palestinian civilian deaths that the lieutenant colonel was also forced to clarify.

The controversy over Jayapal’s remarks follows a period, predating the most recent Hamas attacks, in which some on the left have been criticized for seeming to be less inclined to condemn crimes against humanity carried out against Jews than other ethnic groups. And progressives across the Western world, many of whom are supportive of Palestinians, have sometimes been less strident than they might have been in trying to eradicate antisemitism.

Days of footage of the murderous Hamas rampage through kibbutz communities and grieving Palestinians pulling dead children from the rubble of their homes is hard to watch. But if the world tunes out, the reality of the carnage risks being overshadowed by arguments about the relative weight of horror suffered by either side or related diplomatic and political point-scoring typical of Middle East conflicts.

Emphatically condemning the evil that unfolded on October 7 should be an easy call, even for critics of Israel who decry its long-term policies toward the Palestinians. And it hardly needs to be seen as an endorsement of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s hardline policies. Similarly, efforts to mitigate the civilian bloodbath in Gaza shouldn’t be seen as implicit acquiescence of theocratic Hamas fascism. That neither of these is a given sums up the paucity of political debate about the war, its intractability and ultimately, the endlessly repeating tragedy of this conflict.

Often, a desire to seek political advantage from the situation comes from those with no direct contact with the human agony of those in the firing line. The plight of Palestinian civilians, for example, is sometimes coopted into self-serving anti-colonialism narratives favored by the American left. A backlash against American Jews over Israel’s conduct since the October 7 attack has many traumatized.

**Horrendous accounts of rapes**

Reaction to excruciating reports of systematic rapes and genital mutilations perpetrated by Hamas fighters underscores how politics shapes responses to war.

The imprecision of Jayapal’s remarks on CNN left the impression that she did not condemn these outrages strongly enough. Florida Democratic Rep. Jared Moskowitz told CNN’s Jake Tapper on Tuesday, for instance, that “it was almost like the congresswoman was concerned she was criticizing Hamas too much.”

After two days of criticism, Jayapal clarified and expanded on her comments at a time of growing Israeli fury at the United Nations and other institutions over a perceived sluggishness in condemning the atrocities.

“Let me be completely clear again that I unequivocally condemn Hamas’ use of rape and sexual violence as an act of war,” Jayapal wrote. “This is horrific and across the world, we must stand with our sisters, families, and survivors of rape and sexual assault everywhere to condemn this violence and hold perpetrators accountable.” She added: “My comment about balance was not about rape, and not intended to minimize rape and sexual assault in any way. It was about recognizing the tremendous pain and trauma of so many —Israelis, Palestinians and their diaspora communities—in this terrible war.”

The statement by Jayapal, who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus, was one of the clearest signs yet that the war in Gaza has carved deep political splits in the United States, especially in the Democratic Party, that threaten to endure through 2024 and could impact President Joe Biden’s reelection hopes. The president, whose administration has spent recent days urging Israel to ease the toll on Palestinian civilians, [issued his own strong statement](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/politics/biden-condemns-hamas-sexual-assaults-democrats/index.html) condemning the rapes on Tuesday. He bemoaned “reports of women raped — repeatedly raped — and their bodies being mutilated while still alive — of women corpses being desecrated, Hamas terrorists inflicting as much pain and suffering on women and girls as possible and then murdering them.”

“It is appalling,” the president added.

The lack of global attention to the sexual violence led Netanyahu to rebuke international institutions on Tuesday in a televised address when he exclaimed: “Where the hell are you?

Awful accounts of the rapes and assaults were aired in [an event at the United Nations](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/04/tech/sheryl-sandberg-un-israel-hamas/index.html) Monday, hosted by Israel, that featured volunteers and soldiers giving harrowing testimony about the sexual mutilation of some of the dead bodies they encountered. Former Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg warned, “Silence is complicity,” and added, “Rape should never be used as an act of war.”

And former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, “Organizations, governments and individuals who are committed to a better future for women and girls have a responsibility to condemn all violence against women.”

“It is outrageous that some who claim to stand for justice are closing their eyes and their hearts to the victims of Hamas.”

**How Israel’s defenders explain away civilian carnage**

An unwillingness of some to fully recognize the horror of the rapes of Israeli civilians is mirrored by the way civilian casualties in Gaza are sometimes explained away.

Israel’s closest supporters in the United States often point out, correctly, that Hamas embeds its forces in civilian areas in order to create international outrage when innocent people are killed in reprisal strikes against their positions. The Israeli government insists it takes scrupulous steps to avoid killing civilians. But this does not necessarily absolve Netanyahu’s government of the moral consequences that come in an offensive that has killed so many innocent people. Almost 16,000 Palestinians have died since October 7, according to the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza, although those figures don’t distinguish between combatants and civilians. There have been “many, many thousands of innocent people killed” in Gaza, White House National Security Council coordinator for strategic communications John Kirby [told reporters](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/06/middleeast/gaza-10k-deaths-intl/index.html) on a virtual gaggle Monday.

The Biden administration – which has been stalwart in defending Israel’s right to defend itself against Hamas and in opposing a permanent ceasefire – has warned its ally not to repeat in southern Gaza the devastation it wrought in northern Gaza during the stage of its operation, when tens of thousands of Palestinians fled to the south. But the intensity of the fighting in Gaza – and humanitarian destruction accounted by international aid agencies – raises serious questions about whether Israel has listened.

On the conservative right, South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, [speaking on CNN Sunday](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/03/politics/sen-graham-says-he-has-lost-all-confidence-in-defense-sec-lloyd-austin/index.html) against a ceasefire, dismissed warnings that civilian Palestinian casualties would breed more terrorism, seeming to rationalize those casualties on the grounnds that Palestinians “are taught from the time they’re born to hate the Jews and to kill them.”This is the background to the comment by Conricus over the supposed ratio between Hamas fighters and civilians killed – an assessment first reported by the AFP news agency on Monday. Whether or not that’s true, Conricus calling it “tremendously positive” appears callous. Like Jayapal, Conricus issued his own walkback, saying that the IDF was seeking to kill as few civilians as possible and added: “Every loss of life is sad, I should have chosen my words more carefully.”

Léo Cans, head of mission for Palestine for Médecins Sans Frontières, painted a picture of utter human horror inside Gaza in an interview with CNN International on Tuesday. He spoke of a collapsed health system, a lack of food, drinking water and refuge and of Palestinians being bombed in areas in which Israel suggested they would be safe. Ironically, his language recalled the plea by Netanyahu for the outside world to take notice of the atrocities represented by Hamas rapes. “It is really an attack on humanity that is going on right now in Gaza, I am talking about the humanity of all of us,” Cans told Isa Soares, speaking from Jerusalem.

“The world is watching what is happening there. I am wondering, where is the international community? Where are they to stop this indiscriminate and disproportionate bombing that is going on in Gaza right now?”

US officials told CNN on Tuesday that they expect Israel’s ground operation in Gaza will last several weeks before it transitions by January into a lower-intensity, localized strategy targeting Hamas militants and leaders. But US officials remain deeply concerned over how an offensive that has carried a devastating toll will unfold.

That timeline means that, not for the first time in this horrible war, civilians will bear the brunt.

[President Joe Biden](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) on Tuesday decried [sexual assaults committed by Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/12/04/israel-hamas-october-7-women-sexual-violence-accusations-tapper-pkg-vpx.cnn) during its October 7 terror attack on Israel and called on “all of us” to condemn the acts.

“Over the past few weeks, survivors and witnesses of the attacks have shared the horrific accounts of unimaginable cruelty. Reports of women raped — repeatedly raped — and their bodies being mutilated while still alive — of women corpses being desecrated, Hamas terrorists inflicting as much pain and suffering on women and girls as possible and then murdering them. It is appalli﻿ng,” Biden said at a fundraising event in Boston.

The world, he said, “can’t just look away at what’s going on. It’s on all of us … to forcibly condemn the sexual violence of Hamas terrorists without equivocation.”

The president’s comments come as Democratic Rep. Pramila Jayapal has faced fierce criticism for not more forcefully condemning the acts by Hamas – underscoring a divide in the party over the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

Jayapal, the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said in a new statement Tuesday that she “unequivocally condemns Hamas’ use of rape and sexual violence as an act of war,” following comments she made to CNN’s Dana Bash on Sunday that set off a firestorm among her Democratic House colleagues.

On [“State of the Union,](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/03/politics/rep-pramila-jayapal-argues-ceasefire-in-gaza-is-realistic-as-fighting-resumes/index.html)” the congresswoman condemned the rape of Israeli women by Hamas as “horrific” but noted that over 15,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli attacks in Gaza since the start of the war, saying: “I think we have to be balanced about bringing in the outrages against Palestinians.”

In her latest statement Tuesday, Jayapal said her comment “about balance was not about rape, and not intended to minimize rape and sexual assault in any way.”

“Let me be completely clear again that I unequivocally condemn Hamas’ use of rape and sexual violence as an act of war,” she said in the statement. “This is horrific and across the world, we must stand with our sisters, families, and survivors of rape and sexual assault everywhere to condemn this violence and hold perpetrators accountable.”

Amid the controversy over Jayapal’s comments, two House Democrats are [planning to introduce](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/04/politics/progressive-democrats-resolution-condemning-hamas/index.html) a resolution this week condemning Hamas’ use of sexual violence and rape against Israeli women.

Biden on Tuesday also accused Hamas of refusing to release additional female hostages and ending the pause in fighting that the US helped broker last week.

“Let me be crystal clear: Hamas’ refusal to release the remaining young women is what broke this deal and end the pause in the fighting. Everyone still being held hostage by Hamas need to be returned to their families immediately. We’re not going to stop,”

The wave of drones and missiles that [flew towards Israel overnight](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/13/middleeast/iran-drones-attack-israel-intl-latam/index.html) on Sunday brought with it a new phase of tension, uncertainty and confrontation in the Middle East.

Iran launched [the unprecedented attack](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-14-24/index.html?tab=all) in response to a suspected Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, [Syria](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/syria), earlier this month.

It marked a new chapter in a discord between the two states that percolated for years and has spiralled since [Israel](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) declared war on Hamas last October.

The next steps remain unclear, but Israel is facing pleas from its allies to step back from the brink of open warfare and choose a path of de-escalation.

Here’s what you need to know.

**How did Iran attack Israel?**

More than 300 projectiles – including around 170 drones and over 120 ballistic missiles – were fired toward Israel in the immense aerial attack overnight. Approximately 350 rockets were fired from [Iran](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/iran), Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah, according to Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson Daniel Hagari.

However, “99%” of the projectiles were intercepted by Israel’s aerial defense systems and its allies, according to the Israeli military, with only a small number reaching Israeli territory.

Tehran’s attack targeted the Nevatim airbase, an Iranian army official said on Sunday, alleging that this is where Israel’s [early April strike on the Iranian consulate](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/middleeast/iran-response-israel-damascus-consulate-attack-intl-hnk/index.html) was launched from.

Iranian ballistic missiles that reached Israel fell on the airbase in the south of the country and caused only light structural damage, Hagari said. The base is functioning and continuing its operations following the attack, with planes continuing to use the base, Hagari added.

A senior US military official told reporters Sunday that the US assessed “there’s no significant damage within Israel itself.”

US ships in the eastern Mediterranean Sea destroyed between four and six Iranian ballistic missiles during the attack and aircraft in the region shot down more than 70 Iranian one-way UAVs headed toward Israel. The US Army Patriot missile battery shot down one ballistic missile in the vicinity of Erbil, Iraq, the official said.

**Why did the attack take place?**

Israel and Iran are long-standing rivals and have been engaged in a shadow war for years.

Israel’s war on Hamas, waged since the militant group attacked Israel on October 7, has heightened those tensions.

Iranian-backed forces in Iraq and Syria have launched attacks aimed at US military positions in those countries and Iran’s leadership has [warned that attacks by its allies](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/17/middleeast/iran-links-attacks-to-israels-war-in-gaza-intl/index.html) won’t stop until Israel’s war in Gaza ends.

But fears of a spiralling regional war spiked further in early April, when Iran accused Israel of [bombing its diplomatic complex](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/01/middleeast/syria-iranian-consulate-attack-middle-east-intl/index.html) in Syria.

[That airstrike](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/01/middleeast/iran-syrian-consulate-attack-intl/index.html) destroyed the consulate building in the capital Damascus, killing at least seven officials including Mohammed Reza Zahedi, a top commander in Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), and senior commander Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, Iran’s foreign ministry said at the time.

Zahedi, a former commander of the IRGC’s ground forces, air force, and the deputy commander of its operations, was the most high-profile Iranian target killed since then-US President Donald Trump ordered the assassination of IRGC Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in 2020.

Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Israel would be punished for the attack, while President Ebrahim Raisi said it would “not go unanswered,” state news agency IRNA reported. The Iran-backed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah said the strike would be met with “punishment and revenge.”

The region has been on edge ever since, with the US and Israel warning of intelligence that an Iranian attack was imminent.

**How have Israel and its allies responded to the Iranian strike?**

Israel reacted angrily to the unprecedented strikes, while praising its military’s response.

But Israel’s allies in the West urged the country to work to de-escalate the crisis, rather than respond in a way which could tip the situation into open warfare.

US President Joe Biden spoke by phone with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and made clear that the US would not participate in any offensive operations against Iran, a senior White House administration official told CNN.

Biden told Netanyahu he should consider the events of Saturday night a “win” as Iran’s attacks had been largely unsuccessful, and instead [demonstrated](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-13-24/h_a122620640ce6b581caa13c116f1bc42) Israel’s “remarkable capacity to defend against and defeat even unprecedented attacks.”

After a virtual meeting Sunday, leaders of the G7 condemned in a joint statement the Iranian attack, which it said “risks provoking an uncontrollable regional escalation.”

“We demand that Iran and its proxies cease their attacks, and we stand ready to take further measures now and in response to further destabilizing initiatives”

**What happens next?**

The decisions made by Israel’s War Cabinet will dictate the immediate next steps.

The three-man group met Sunday and then again on Monday, and the attacks sparked [a heated debate](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/15/middleeast/israel-war-cabinet-iran-debate-intl) over how to respond, two Israeli sources told CNN.

On Monday, the war cabinet reviewed military plans for a potential response during a nearly three-hour meeting, an Israeli official said.

The war cabinet remains determined to respond to Iran’s attack, but it is not clear at this point if a decision has been made on what that response will be. However, there is a sense that Israel must act quickly, the official said.

The IDF chief of staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi said later on Monday that Iran’s attack “will be met with a response,” while IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari said the force will do “all that is necessary” to defend Israel and “will do that at the time we choose.”

In addition to a potential military response, the war cabinet is also [mulling diplomatic options](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-14-24/h_413354f6457243104b25ef504f50b2e0) to further isolate Iran on the world stage.

One of the members, Benny Gantz said Israel will “exact a price from Iran in a way and time that suits us.”

Israeli government hardliners have called for firm action. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich urged a response that “resonates throughout the Middle East,” and National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir said Israel should “go crazy.”

Israel told the United States that it’s not “looking for a significant escalation with Iran,” a senior Biden administration told reporters Sunday.

“They’re looking to protect themselves and defend themselves,” the official said.

On Sunday, Iran said a “new equation” in its adversarial relationship with Israel had been opened, and warned of a “much bigger” assault on the country should Netanyahu decide on a tit-for-tat attack.

“We have decided to create a new equation, which is that if from now on the Zionist regime attacks our interests, assets, personalities, and citizens, anywhere, and at any point, we will retaliate against them,” the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Hossein Salami told Iranian state TV. The “Zionist regime” is a term Iran uses to refer to Israel.

The Israelis have “basically accepted” a six-week ceasefire proposal [in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-03-02-24/index.html), a senior Biden administration official told reporters Saturday. A second phase would be worked out over those six weeks “to build something more enduring.”

The six-week ceasefire would allow for the release of hostages in Gaza deemed the most vulnerable, including women, the elderly and the wounded, and the flow of aid into the beleaguered coastal enclave.

That official said there is a “framework deal” that Israel has “more or less accepted.” The sticking point, the official said, is that Hamas has not yet agreed to a “defined category of vulnerable hostages.”

US officials said Friday that talks to reach a ceasefire agreement to halt the fighting between Hamas and Israel in Gaza by Ramadan – now just about a week away –[appeared to be on track](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/01/politics/israel-hamas-ceasefire-talks/index.html), even after [more than 100 Palestinians](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-food-truck-deaths-israel-wwk-intl/index.html) were killed Thursday as they tried to access food in Gaza City.

And on Friday afternoon, President Joe Biden called for an “immediate ceasefire.”

“We’re trying to work out a deal between Israel and Hamas on the hostages being returned and an immediate ceasefire in Gaza for at least the next six weeks and to allow the surge of aid to the Gaza Strip,” Biden said at the White House during a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

US officials said Friday there were no indications that the discussions had been significantly derailed because of the aid site deaths but that much hinges on an expected Hamas response to what has been discussed in Paris and Doha, Qatar, in the past week. Qatar, Egypt, Israel and the US have been involved in those talks. On Thursday, a Hamas official warned, however, that the negotiations could be affected.

Ad Feedback

As international efforts to broker a ceasefire continue, more talks are planned in Cairo, two sources familiar with the matter said Saturday. Negotiators from the US, Israel, Egypt and Hamas are expected to attend, a diplomatic source familiar with the discussions said. It’s not clear whether Qatar will attend.

Discussions between Israel and Hamas would be indirect, in separate rooms. Israel has asked Hamas for a list of the hostages, including who is living and who is dead. Hamas has still not responded to last week’s Paris meeting, which was followed this week by technical meetings inthe Qatari capital of Doha with teams from US, Egypt, Qatar and Israel.

Also on Saturday, a White House official said Vice President Kamala Harris would meet Monday with Israeli war cabinet member Benny Gantz amid the US push for a temporary ceasefire.

“The vice president will discuss the urgency of securing a hostage deal, which would allow for a temporary ceasefire, and the need to significantly expand and sustain aid flows into Gaza, given the dire humanitarian situation,” the official said, adding that Harris would reiterate that the US is prepared to increase aid through airdrops and a maritime corridor.

Harris has been involved in the “day-after” planning for Gaza — and those discussions will continue Monday with Gantz, who is also expected to meet with national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

Biden had said [earlier in the week](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/hamas-demands-gaza-negotiations/index.html) that he hoped there’d be a ceasefire in Gaza by Monday, but he offered a mixed assessment of that possibility Friday, saying: “I think we’ll get there, but it’s not there yet. And it may not get there now.”

The US, meanwhile, is working with partners to scale up aid to Gaza. On Saturday, the US and Jordan [air-dropped humanitarian aid](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/02/politics/us-airdrops-aid-gaza/index.html) into the besieged enclave, “part of a sustained effort to get more aid into Gaza, including by expanding the flow of aid through land corridors and routes,” US Central Command said.

There were 66 bundles dropped, a US official said. There was no water or medical supplies in the bundles, which were dropped in a location that the US assessed people in need were sheltering.

Following the airdrops, Biden said on social media the amount of aid flowing into Gaza was “not nearly enough,” adding that the US “will continue to pull out every stop we can to get more aid in.”

Calls are growing for an investigation into one of the worst single tragedies to occur during Israel’s war with Hamas took, after [scores of Palestinians were killed](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-29-24/h_c98a6097a644b5ab559c46d6bb44e841) trying to access food aid in Gaza City on Thursday.

At least 112 people were killed and 760 injured in an incident where Israel Defense Forces (IDF) troops used live fire as hungry and desperate Palestinian civilians were gathering around food aid trucks, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza. CNN is unable to independently confirm these numbers.

The incident took place amid a backdrop of vast hunger and dire poverty in the besieged enclave, where food aid has been so rare as to frequently elicit panic when it arrives.

But there are competing narratives surrounding the devastation that have been put forward by Israel and by eyewitnesses on the ground.

The United Nations has said an independent investigation is required to establish the facts, and nations including France have backed that call.

Here’s what we know.

**What happened?**

The deaths occurred amid scenes of chaos on Haroun Al Rasheed Street in western Gaza City, where crowds of hungry Palestinians had gathered for food aid.

A convoy of at least 18 food trucks arrived at around 4.30 a.m. on Thursday morning, sent by countries in the region including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, according to eyewitnesses.

Civilians swarmed around the newly arrived aid trucks in the hope of getting food, and Israeli forcessoon [started shooting](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-29-24/h_eab1c4671b6f6357c72543a882ce2749), witnesses said.

The aid trucks tried to escape the area, accidentally ramming others and causing further deaths and injuries, the eyewitnesses added to CNN. Ambulances struggled to reach those in need because rubble was blocking the way, one of those witnesses, Ahmad Abu Al Foul told CNN.

The majority of the casualties occurred as a result of people being rammed by aid trucks trying to escape Israeli fire, according to Khader Al Za’anoun, a journalist in Gaza with the official Palestinian news agency, Wafa.

Al Za’anoun, who was at the scene and witnessed the incident, said that while there were large crowds waiting for food to be distributed from aid trucks, the chaos and confusion that led to people being hit by the trucks only started once Israeli soldiers opened fire.

“Most of the people that were killed were rammed by the aid trucks during the chaos and while trying to escape the Israeli gunfire,” Al Za’anoun said.

The United Nations on Friday said many of the [Palestinian civilians](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-food-truck-deaths-israel-wwk-intl/index.html) injured during the carnage suffered gunshot wounds, citing a UN team that visited the hospital where survivors were taken.

UN Secretary General’s spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric told a news conference that “from what they saw, in terms of the patients alive and getting treatment is that there is a large number of gunshot wounds.” The team did not have access to the dead bodies so could not determine if it was the same for those killed.

**What is Israel saying?**

Israel offered an evolving account of the incident as the day progressed.

In its first comments, the IDF said the incident began when Palestinians attempted to loot the trucks. “Early this morning, during the entry of humanitarian aid trucks into the northern Gaza Strip, Gazan residents surrounded the trucks, and looted the supplies being delivered. During the incident, dozens of Gazans were injured as a result of pushing and trampling,” the IDF told CNN.

Later on Thursday, an Israeli military spokesperson claimed in a briefing that there were two separate incidents involving aid trucks in Gaza Thursday.

First, he said trucks entered northern Gaza and were rushed by crowds, with trucks running over people. Subsequently, he said, a group of Palestinians approached Israeli forces, who then opened fire on the Palestinians.

“The truckloads went into the north, then there was the stampede, and then afterwards, there was the event against our forces. That’s how things transpired this morning,” the spokesman said.

That timeline directly contradicts the eyewitness accounts, which suggested that the Israeli military opened fire on people near the trucks, causing drivers to pull away in panic.

In a briefing Thursday, IDF spokesperson Daniel Hargari denied there had been a strike on the convoy. He said that Israeli tanks had fired warning shots to disperse a crowd around an aid convoy in Gaza, after seeing that people were being trampled.

He insisted that the tanks were there “to secure the humanitarian corridor” so the aid convoy could reach its destination.

The IDF released a short video, which appears to show a tank driving parallel to the crowd, several meters away.

“As you can see in this video, the tanks that were there to secure the convoy sees the Gazans being trampled and cautiously tries to disperse the mob with a few warning shots,” Hagari said.

When the crowd started to grow and “things got out of hand,” the tank retreated to avoid harming Gazans, he added.

“I think, as a military man, they were backing up securely, risking their own lives, not shooting at the mob,” he said.

**What is the humanitarian situation in Gaza?**

More than a half a million people in Gaza are on the brink of famine, United Nations agencies warned on Tuesday, as the war in the enclave stretches towards the five-month mark.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said at least 576,000 people across Gaza are “facing catastrophic levels of deprivation and starvation.” Meanwhile, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) warned “of a real prospect of famine by May, with 500,000 people at risk if the threat is allowed to materialize.”

“Today, food aid is required by almost the entire population of 2.2 million people. Gaza is seeing the worst level of child malnutrition anywhere in the world,” Carl Skau, WFP Deputy Executive Director, told the Security Council during its Tuesday session. “One child in every six under the age of 2 is acutely malnourished.”

Aid has been so sparse that, when available, it has often prompted panic. Jan Egeland, the Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, warned of chaotic scenes around aid trucks in Gaza, during an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour earlier this week.

“The chaos, yes, around the aid line is becoming worse and worse because there’s so little aid coming in,” he said.

“Today, I’m pretty shaken actually from what I saw,” he went on. “The minute we crossed the border … you see the aid trucks going full speed down the road, being chased by gangs of youth who jumped the trucks and before our eyes, loot mattresses, blankets, food, et cetera, to the desperate people outside who want to get some aid.”

**What has the international community said?**

The US State Department expressed condolences for those killed and injured and said the US was pressing Israel for answers.

“Far too many innocent Palestinians have been killed over the course of this conflict, not just today, but over the past nearly five months,” State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said at a press briefing.

“We have been in touch with the Israeli government since early this morning and understand that an investigation is underway,” he said.

Miller said the US is aware of “conflicting reports” about what happened and would only say the US knows that a commercial convoy not associated with the UN was delivering the aid.

“If there’s anything that the aerial footage of today’s incident makes clear, it is just how desperate the situation on the ground is,” said Miller, calling for Israel to “allow the entry of more assistance into Gaza, through as many points of access as possible, and to enable safe and secure distribution of that aid throughout Gaza.”

The UN has condemned the incident and said it must be investigated. UN Secretary General António Guterres said he was “appalled” by the growing death toll in Gaza and reiterated calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and unconditional release of all Israeli hostages in Gaza.

His spokesman Stéphane Dujarric said in a statement: “The desperate civilians in Gaza need urgent help, including those in the besieged north where the United Nations has not been able to deliver aid in more than a week.”

Saudi Arabia also condemned the incident, calling on the international community “to take a firm stance by obliging Israel to respect international humanitarian law,” while the United Arab Emirates called for an “independent and transparent investigation.”

Colombia announced it would suspend the purchase of weapons from Israel following the deaths. “This is called genocide and is reminiscent of the Holocaust even if the world powers do not like to recognize it,” Colombian President Gustavo Petro said in a post.

French Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Séjourné supported calls for a probe into what happened. Speaking to French radio station France Inter, Séjourné branded the events as “undefendable and injustifiable.”

The French Foreign Affairs ministry also released a statement on Thursday saying France was “waiting for all light to be shed on the acts mentioned, which are very serious.”

**What this means for the war**

Thursday’s tragedy represented one of the deadliest single incidents in Gaza since Israel’s war against Hamas began.

And it came at a critical time for the conflict, with negotiations between Israel and Hamas on a deal to pause fighting and allow humanitarian aid into Gaza reaching a [potentially pivotal moment](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/27/middleeast/gaza-ceasefire-israel-hamas-biden-reaction-intl/index.html).

Hamas senior member Izzat Al-Risheq warned that the killing of people collecting aid from trucks in Gaza could lead to the failure of ongoing talks.

“Negotiations are not an open process,” he said in a statement published by the Hamas on Telegram.

“We will not allow for the pathway of the negotiations…[to become] a cover for the enemy’s continued crimes against our people in the Gaza Strip,” Al-Risheq said.

At the State Department briefing, Miller also said the incident indicated how necessary it was to reach “a potential temporary ceasefire as part of a hostage deal” to allow more aid in.

“We continue to work day and night to achieve that outcome, including through calls (President Joe Biden) held this morning with President Al Sisi of Egypt and the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim, as well as one Secretary Blinken held earlier today with Qatari Prime Minister Al Thani,” Miller said.

“Every leader on those calls agreed that this terrible event underscores the urgency in bringing the hostage talks to a close.”

President Biden said Monday during an appearance at an ice cream shop in New York City that he hoped there would be a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict by “next Monday,” though officials from Israel, Hamas and Qatar – which is helping mediate negotiations – distanced themselves from that timeline.

Biden said Thursday “there are two competing versions of what happened” that his administration is looking into. When asked by CNN’s Arlette Saenz at the White House on Thursday if he worried the deaths would complicate negotiations, Biden responded: “Oh, I know it will.” But he still expressed optimism that a deal on the hostages and a potential ceasefire could be reached soon.

More than 30,000 people have been killed in Gaza since Israel’s war with Hamas began in October, the health ministry in the besieged enclave said Thursday, a bleak milestone that comes amid growing international pressure on Israel to halt fighting and fears of further bloodshed in the southern city of Rafah.

The towering figure underscores a horrific, [months-long ordeal](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/middleeast/khan-younis-devastation/) for Palestinians inside the strip, during which Israel’s bombing and ground campaigns have displaced the vast majority of the population and created a dire humanitarian crisis.

In all, 30,035 people have been killed so far, the ministry said Thursday, adding that the number of injured is over 70,000.

Israel is facing [mounting pressure globally](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/politics/us-un-security-council-temporary-ceasefire-draft-intl/index.html) to halt the conflict, but its campaign in Gaza has retained the support of the United States, its key ally and largest supplier of military aid. The US proposed a “temporary ceasefire” at the United Nations earlier this month, but has vetoed calls for an immediate halt in the conflict.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said Thursday “there appears to be no bounds, no words, to capture the horrors that are unfolding before our eyes in Gaza.”

What is happening in Gaza is “carnage” Turk said, speaking at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. “It is time – well past time – for peace, investigation and accountability,” Turk said.

The latest milestone preludes fears of more suffering in Rafah, Gaza’s southernmost city where more than 1 million people are crammed, and where Israel is expected to launch a fresh offensive.

Gaza’s health ministry does not distinguish between civilians and fighters but has said in recent updates that around 70% of the casualties are women and children.

Israel [estimates about 10,000](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-17-24/h_b6d83635bd97ee1fe2c1ed924829eb4c) Hamas fighters have been killed since October 7, when Israel declared war on the militant group. More than 1,200 people in Israel were killed during Hamas’ attacks on that day, and more than 250 were kidnapped and taken hostage in Gaza.

CNN cannot independently verify the casualty tolls in Gaza or the Israeli estimates of Hamas fighters killed.

On Thursday, soon after the latest death toll figures were published, at least 53 people died and 120 were injured in Israeli gunfire in Gaza City as they were waiting for food, according to several eyewitnesses and the spokesperson for the Palestinian Red Crescent, Ahmad Abu Al Foul.

Hungry civilians had swarmed around newly arrived aid trucks in the hope to get food, when Israeli tanks and drones started shooting at the people in Haroun Al Rasheed Street in western Gaza City, in the Sheikh Ajleen area.

The aid trucks tried to escape the area, accidentally ramming others and causing further deaths and injuries, the eyewitnesses added to CNN. Responding to CNN, the IDF said “the incident is under review”.

“Early this morning, during the entry of humanitarian aid trucks into the northern Gaza Strip, Gazan residents surrounded the trucks, and looted the supplies being delivered. During the incident, dozens of Gazans were injured as a result of pushing and trampling,” the IDF told CNN.

Nearly five months on from Hamas’ October 7 attack, Israel has said that more than 100 hostages remain in captivity. Its political and military leaders have pledged to press ahead with their objectives to return those hostages and “destroy” Hamas, despite international pressure to reduce the intensity of their campaign.

Israeli war cabinet minister Benny Gantz on February 17 warned that Israeli forces will expand military operations in Rafah if hostages are not returned by Ramadan, which is expected to begin on March 10 or 11.

“The world must know, and Hamas leaders must know – if by Ramadan our hostages are not home – the fighting will continue to the Rafah area,” Gantz said at a gathering of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in Jerusalem.

**Fears that worst is still to come**

Israel’s Western allies have grown increasingly concerned over the nature of its bombing and ground campaigns in Gaza, with even its most important partner, the United States, raising with increased regularity the plight of the millions of Palestinians caught in the path of its offensive.

President Joe Biden [remarked earlier this month](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/biden-calls-israels-response-in-gaza-over-the-top/) that the Israel Defense Forces’ conduct has been “over the top,” his most direct rebuke to date.

Biden subsequently told Netanyahu that the military action in Rafah “should not proceed without a credible and executable plan for ensuring the safety of and support for the civilians,” according to a readout of a phone call between the two leaders, and the US later proposed a UN resolution on a “temporary ceasefire,” though it has not supported calls by other countries for a ceasefire to be immediately implemented.

As well as displacing the majority of Gaza’s 2.2 million people, the war has [drastically diminished supplies](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/middleeast/famine-looms-in-gaza-israel-war-intl/index.html) of water, electricity and food, and cut off access to vital life-saving care. The hospitals in the enclave have become battlegrounds, with dozens of facilities no longer functional.

The UN Humanitarian Affairs Coordination Office, OCHA, said on Tuesday that at least 576,000 people across Gaza are “facing catastrophic levels of deprivation and starvation” and are “one step away from famine.”

Almost the entire population of 2.2 million people require food aid, according to the UN World Food Programme (WFP), which added one in six children under the age of two is acutely malnourished.

“Gaza is seeing the worst level of child malnutrition anywhere in the world,” Carl Skau, WFP Deputy Executive Director, told the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

A sprawling tent city has meanwhile been formed around Rafah, as more and more displaced Palestinians make the trek to the city – the last place to which they can flee north of the shuttered border with Egypt.

In recent weeks, hopes for a ceasefire-for-hostages deal have repeatedly risen and then fallen, as high-stakes diplomatic efforts to secure a pause in the fighting continue.

On Monday, CNN reported Hamas had backed off some key demands in the [negotiations for a hostage deal and pause in the fighting](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/us/white-house-hamas-hostage-negotiation/index.html) in Gaza following Israeli accusations that its position was “delusional,” according to two sources familiar with the discussions.

Biden said that he [hopes there’ll be a ceasefire](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/hamas-demands-gaza-negotiations/index.html) in the Israel-Hamas conflict by “next Monday,” saying that a deal was “close” but “not done yet.”

However, officials from Israel, Hamas and Qatar have cautioned against Biden’s optimism, suggesting that differences remain as negotiators work to secure an agreement.

The United States is looking into possible airdrops of aid into Gaza as the humanitarian crisis there deepens and assistance fails to reach the people in the war-torn strip, two US officials told CNN on Wednesday.

US officials have consistently said much more must be done in order for critically needed assistance to reach those in Gaza, where more than 2 million people are at “imminent risk” of famine, according to the United Nations.

One US official said the prospect of airdrops is being seriously considered based on the conditions on the ground.

Earlier this week, Jordan, Egypt, the UAE, Qatar and France airdropped relief aid on various areas in the Gaza Strip in a sign of how desperate the situation has become. [Axios](https://www.axios.com/2024/02/28/biden-airdrop-aid-gaza-israel?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=editorial) first reported that the US is exploring the move.

Top US officials have called on Israel to open additional crossings to allow aid to enter Gaza as the flow of trucks into the enclave trickled down to less than 100 per day last week, according to US Agency for International Development Administrator Samantha Power.

“It is absolutely clear, that as conditions continue to deteriorate in Gaza, for the Gazan people, two crossings is not enough,” Power said Wednesday in a video message from the Kerem Shalom crossing.

“We are talking to Israeli officials about the need to open up far more crossings, far more passages into Gaza, so that vitally needed humanitarian assistance can be dramatically surged,” Power said. “This is a matter of life and death.” graded Israel’s debt rating from A1 to A2 on Friday, underscoring the economic damage of the country’s war with Hamas, which has resulted in thousands of human casualties and stoked geopolitical tensions around the world.

In a Friday [statement](https://ratings.moodys.com/ratings-news/415081), Moody’s said the primary driver of its decision was an “assessment that the ongoing military conflict with Hamas, its aftermath and wider consequences materially raise political risk for Israel as well as weaken its executive and legislative institutions and its fiscal strength, for the foreseeable future.”

While an A2 rating is still considered investment grade, the downgrade will likely make it more expensive for Israel to borrow money.

In mid-October, less than two weeks after Hamas’ [deadly attack on Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-intelligence-intl/index.html) on October 7, Moody’s warned that Israel’s credit rating was in danger of a downgrade.

At the time, Moody’s said that while Israel’s credit profile [had been resilient to military conflict](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/business/moodys-israel-credit-rating-potential-downgrade/index.html) in the past, “the severity of the current military conflict raises the possibility of longer lasting and material credit impact.”

On Friday, the credit ratings agency said its decision was based on Israel’s projected higher budget deficit due to increased military spending, saying it expects Israel’s defense spending to be nearly double the level of 2022 by the end of 2024 and potentially rise even higher in the coming years.

“While there are currently negotiations underway to secure the release of the hostages against a temporary ceasefire and more humanitarian aid into Gaza, there is no clarity on the likelihood, time frame and durability of such an agreement,” the agency said.

Moody’s also warned of the “significant” risk of an escalation of the current conflict, including the [potential involvement of Hezbollah](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/middleeast/hezbollah-explainer-intl/index.html), an Islamist group with paramilitary forces to the north of Israel.

“Conflict with Hezbollah would pose a much bigger risk to Israel’s territory,” Moody’s said.

As they watch airstrikes and hot-barreled howitzers pound targets in Gaza, check and recheck their personal weapons, communications and webbing, there can be very few among the thousands of Israeli soldiers poised for combat who don’t quietly wonder: “Is this a trap?”

Hamas, and its backers in Tehran, would have certainly planned to meet a fierce Israeli ground offensive after the terrorizing infiltration of Israel.

It’s possible – even probable – that the singular horrors inflicted on so many civilians were intended by Hamas to guarantee a massive Israeli response, no matter the cost to civilians in Gaza.

Israel’s next moves will determine the shape of things to come – perhaps for decades. It all comes down to Gaza.

Hamas has riddled the Strip with networks of tunnels. It will have laced the landscape above ground with booby traps, and will have plans to meet the IDF with anything from swarms of suicide bombers to snatch teams to take soldiers hostage.

US generals and other officials have been [sharing their experiences of urban warfare on a large scale with Israel.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/politics/us-military-advisers-iraq-israel-ground-assault-gaza/index.html)

It took Iraq’s military – backed by American, British and other special forces along with relentless air strikes – nine months to drive ISIS out of Mosul in 2017.

The northern Iraqi city was largely emptied of civilians but fighting was house to house. ISIS used tunnel systems it had built to ambush government troops who painfully took Mosul brick by bloody brick.

The bomb-making skills of Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group and close ally of Hamas, have metastasized across the Middle East. In Gaza, Israeli troops will know they face improvised explosive devices built with charges that can cripple a tank. They’ll know that Hezbollah’s abilities to destroy armor will have been further refined since Israel last did serious battle in Lebanon in 2006 and was shocked by the sophistication of the militia.

Hamas now has anti-aircraft capabilities – Israel’s Apache helicopters providing close support to infantry will be vulnerable to one man with a SAM (surface to air missile).

No doubt Hamas also has crews of propaagandists ready to make “kill videos” of their attacks on Israeli troops. Nothing is more likely to inflame, or radicalize, angry young men than films of gore and daring – ISIS taught us that. **Phase two**

It’s safe to assume that Hamas would have planned for widespread carnage in Gaza. Indeed that may be the objective of phase two after the October 7 attacks.

“Any miscalculation in continuing genocide and forced displacement can have serious and bitter consequences, both in the region and for the warmongers,” said Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on Sunday.

His words aren’t meant as analysis – they’re a threat.

The White House knows this. A trap sprung against Israel could have wide and dangerous consequences leading to the sort of “Clash of Civilizations” that followed 9/11.

A major concern for President Joe Biden will be the welfare of US hostages in Gaza and for the other 200-plus souls held by Hamas and other groups in the enclave.

But since the weekend, CNN’s own sources in Washington have reflected concerns that a large-scale Israeli ground operation risks igniting a conflagration that could burn out of control – of the sort that took hold in Iraq after the US-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has, for many years, drawn a straight line between Hamas and the so-called Islamic State.  He already sees the Israel-Hamas conflict as a clash of civlization. “Hamas are the new Nazis. They are the new ISIS and we have to fight them together just as the world, the civilized world, united to fight the Nazis and united to fight ISIS,” he said at a press conference during the visit of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak this week.

Hamas’ latest atrocities were a Grand Guignol of horror, but the militant movement isn’t ISIS. Hamas has in fact worked hard, and violently, to snuff out ISIS elements in Gaza who represented a form of political Islam that it deeply opposed.

Hamas does hope to establish a Palestinian state based on the teachings of Islam. But it has no pretentions to a caliphate. Crucially it also has no history of attacks outside Israel and the Palestinian territories, nor has it harnessed the internet into worldwide attempts at radicalization.

But Hamas is committed to the destruction of the Jewish state. World leaders have recoiled from its latest atrocities and have been vocal in supporting Israel.

“The struggle [against terror groups] must be without mercy,” said French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday in Israel.

But he added a caveat that, arguably, is rooted as much in realpolitik as it is in ethics: An effort to avoid getting the West sucked into a conflict that could, or would, be seen as a war against Islam (again).

That “struggle,” he said, “must be without mercy, but not without rules.”Some 1,400 people were killed in in Israel during the Hamas-led raids. Since then, Israeli strikes have killed more than 6,400 people in Gaza and injured a further 17,000, according to information from Hamas-controlled health authorities in Gaza and published by the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah. The Israel Defense Forces say that they’re trying to minimize civilian casualties.

A state of near-total siege has been imposed on the 2.3 million population. The UN says 1.4 million people have been displaced inside the thin strip of land.

A ground operation by Israel, though, would inevitable mean these figures shoot up. On both sides.

There have been pro-Palestinian marches throughout the world protesting at the level of destruction visited already on Gaza by Israel. If a land incursion gets underway it will be much worse – and the protests more loud.

Meanwhile Israel’s enemies – all dedicated to the destruction of the state itself – have been meeting in Lebanon.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah met a deputy head of Hamas, Saleh Al-Arouri, and the secretary-general of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad Al-Nakhla, on Wednesday.

“An assessment was made of… what the parties of the resistance axis must do at this sensitive stage to achieve a real victory for the resistance in Gaza and Palestine and to stop the treacherous and brutal aggression against our people,” Hezbollah said in a statement afterward.

One can be sure that minders from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Brigade, Tehran’s leading international military and intelligence arm, were on hand. The Quds brigade has trained, funded and guided all three groups for many years.

They’ll be looking to exploit Israel’s next moves in Gaza as their own “phase two” of the October 7 attacks.

Hezbollah has already been drawing Israeli forces away from an exclusive focus on Gaza by skirmishing along Lebanon’s southern border. The US has blamed Iran for sending Iraqi proxies to hit American logistics bases in Baghdad. The cauldron of conflict has been kept simmering with attempts by the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen to fire missiles towards Israel, which were shot down by the US.

Americans and many European nationals are being told to leave many Middle Eastern countries close to Israel; even the Australians too have three planes on standby to handle evacuations.

John Kirby, the spokesman for the US National Security Council, said Monday that the administration was “watching very, very closely” for signs Iranian-backed militia groups are planning to ramp up attacks on US military forces stationed in the Middle East.

**Consumed by rage**

Iran may be trying to draw US Washington’s attention away from the Israeli theater – but it may also be trying to goad the US into more conflict.

That’s a conflict that the US is trying to avoid. Biden, according to CNN’s own reporting, is advising caution in talks with Israel’s PM. He has reinforced those private discussions with public counsel.

“You can’t look at what has happened here to mothers or fathers or grandparents, sons, daughters, children, even babies and not scream out for justice – justice must be done – but I caution this, while you feel that rage, don’t be consumed by it,” he said. “After 9/11, we were enraged in the United States. While we saw justice and got justice, we also made mistakes.”

Those mistakes led to the US-led invasion of Iraq, a widespread belief that Islam was under attack from the West, chaos in the Middle East, the so-called Islamic State or Caliphate itself – and world-wide terror attacks.

“When President Biden warns the Israeli government not to repeat the mistakes it made in Afghanistan, he is speaking from significant lived experience. As we all know now, the US overreacted after 9/11 and lost so much of the goodwill initially generated in the immediate aftermath, whether that was in terms of the ‘war of choice in Iraq’ and its aftermath or the expansion of the war in Afghanistan,” said Karin von Hippel, director of the Royal United Services Institute and a former adviser to the US military on combating terrorism.

That’s the conventional wisdom.

Martin Sherman, head of the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies and a long-time advocate of a harder line against his country’s regional rivals or enemies, disagrees.

He believes that Israel should go into Gaza, and hard.

“I don’t think that the Arabs will ever really come to terms with Israel… the minimum that Israel can strive for is to be greatly feared and the best it can hope for is to be grudgingly accepted,” he said.

The IDF soldiers poised in their mustering points for what may be a major battle in Gaza might also wonder if, years from now, their sons may be back there again, striking out to be “greatly feared.”

The warnings from senior UN officials came after Israeli airstrikes on Gaza killed more than 700 people in 24 hours, the highest daily number published since Israeli strikes against what it called Hamas targets in Gaza began two and a half weeks ago, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah on Tuesday.

UNRWA director of communications Juliette Touma told CNN that the agency was sheltering some 600,000 people across Gaza. “UNRWA is their only lifeline,” Touma said.

The UNRWA director for Gaza Tom White told CNN that aid workers would have to decide what aspects of life-saving aid they could and could not provide to civilians.

“Do we provide fuel for desalination plants for drinking water? Can we provide fuel to hospitals? Can we provide the essential fuel that is currently producing the bread that is feeding people in Gaza?” he said.

UNRWA was founded in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War to provide essential services for Palestinians who had been made refugees by the conflict. It began its operations in 1950 and its mandate has since been repeatedly renewed.

As well as humanitarian aid, UNRWA also provides schooling to almost 300,000 students in Gaza, according to figures from the 2021/22 school year. Recent fighting has meant that schools have become places of refuge for thousands of Gazans who have fled their homes.

But White warned that fuel shortages could lead to the agency “winding down” its operations, even as some humanitarian supplies begin to arrive through the Rafah crossing. White did not specify exactly when that process would begin, but stressed that the agency cannot operate without fuel. “Even if convoys come into Gaza, we won’t have the fuel in our trucks to collect that aid or distribute that aid,” he said.

“We need to find a solution to the fuel – otherwise our aid operation will come to a stop,” White told CNN.

**A deepening crisis**

The deteriorating health environment, lack of sanitation, and consumption of dirty, salty water in Gaza is raising fears of a health crisis in which people [could start dying from dehydration](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/24/middleeast/gaza-water-war-climate-intl-cmd/index.html) as the water system collapses while bombs continue to rain down.

Just eight out of 20 aid trucks scheduled to cross into [Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/middleeast/queen-rania-jordan-amanpour-interview-intl/index.html) on Tuesday made the journey, UNRWA said. No specific reason was provided as to why the other 12 trucks didn’t make it through the Rafah crossing.

Since the start of the Israeli siege two weeks ago, six hospitals in Gaza have been forced to close due to a lack of fuel, the World Health Organization said on Tuesday.

Among those at risk of dying or suffering medical complications are “1,000 patients dependent on dialysis” and “130 premature babies” and other vulnerable patients “who depend on a stable and uninterrupted supply of electricity to stay alive,” WHO said in a statement.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on Tuesday ruled out any fuel being allowed to enter Gaza, saying [Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/business/hamas-secret-investment-portfolio-israel/index.html) would co-opt fuel for its operational infrastructure and to continue its rocket attacks.

Israel has also disputed that there are fuel shortages in Gaza. Responding to the UNRWA’s post on X about low supplies, the IDF posted an aerial photo of what it said were fuel tanks in Gaza, and claimed they held more than 500,000 liters of fuel. CNN is unable to verify the IDF claim.

Israel’s leadership has vowed to wipe out [Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/16/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-war-explained-week-2-mime-intl/index.html) in response to its October 7 deadly terror attacks and kidnap rampage in which 1,400 people, mostly civilians, were killed and more than 200 [taken hostage](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/middleeast/israel-hostages-freed-lifshitz-cooper-intl-hnk/index.html).

In the wake of the assault, Israel launched a sustained aerial bombardment of Gaza that has killed more than 6,400 people and injured a further 17,000, according to information from Hamas-controlled health authorities in Gaza and published by the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah

More than 700 of those were killed in Gaza in the previous 24-hour period, according to Palestinian officials. Those killed included 305 children, 173 women and 78 elderly individuals, the ministry said.

Some two million people are crammed into the 140 square mile coastal strip that makes up Gaza, half of whom are children.

Al Jazeera said its bureau chief in Gaza, Wael Al-Dahdouh, lost his wife, son, and daughter in what it said was an Israeli airstrike. The blast hit a house in the Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip where the family was taking shelter after being displaced, according to Al Jazeera.

CNN cannot independently confirm the source of the blast at the house and Al Jazeera did not provide evidence linking it directly to an Israeli strike. The IDF has not yet responded to CNN requests for comment.

**No international consensus**

On Wednesday, United States President Joe Biden described killing innocents as “a price of waging war,” and urged Israel to try to avoid civilian deaths.

“I’m sure innocents have been killed, and it’s a price of waging war,” Biden said Wednesday during a press conference in the Rose Garden.

Israel should be “incredibly careful to be sure that they’re focusing on going after the folks that are propagating this war against Israel,” rather than civilians. “It’s against their interests when that doesn’t happen.”

Biden also said that he had “no confidence” in civilian death figures provided by the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza. “I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed,” he said.

Meanwhile, a spat has broken out between Israel and the UN, after Secretary General Antonio Guterres appealed for a ceasefire and said he was “concerned about the clear violations of international humanitarian law we are witnessing in Gaza.”

Guterres condemned Hamas’ “horrifying and unprecedented” terror attack on October 7, but said it “cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.”

“It is important to recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum,” Guterres said in remarks to the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

His comments sparked a furious response from Israeli officials. Israel’s ambassador to the UN GIlad Erdan said Guterres was “not fit to lead the UN” and called for him to “resign immediately.”

Nearly three weeks since the outbreak of fighting, the UN’s Security Council remains divided on how to proceed with the crisis. Two differing resolutions on the matter, introduced by the US and Russia, both failed to pass on Wednesday.

The draft resolution from the US called for “humanitarian pauses,” not a ceasefire, to allow for aid to reach Gazan civilians. The US previously vetoed [a Brazilian draft](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/europe/us-veto-security-council-israel-gaza-war-intl/index.html#:~:text=Follow%20CNN-,US%20vetoes%20Security%20Council%20call%20for,pause'%20in%20Israel%2DHamas%20war&text=US%20Ambassador%20to%20the%20United,resolution%20on%20October%2018%2C%202023.) calling for a humanitarian pause.

The US has rebutted calls for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, with National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby telling CNN on Monday that Hamas must first release hostages held in Gaza.

Talks to secure the release of a large number of hostages being held by Hamas in Gaza are ongoing, [CNN reported Tuesday](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/politics/hostage-negotiations-hamas-israel/index.html), citing two sources familiar with the matter and one Western diplomat familiar with the deliberations, but the talks are being complicated by a number of factors.

The US, Israel, Qatar, Egypt and Hamas are engaged in the ongoing deliberations. [Four hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/23/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-war-monday-intl-hnk/index.html) – two American and two Israeli – have been freed so far. But the hope now is to reach a deal for a bigger group of hostages to be released at once.

Israel has so far held off on making a ground incursion into Gaza, and the US has [pressed Israel to further delay](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/22/politics/us-israel-ground-incursion-delay/index.html) to allow for the release of more hostages held by Hamas.

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen said outside the UN Tuesday it was Israel’s mission to bring the hostages home.

“While we are still here, there are babies that are in captivity, twins, holocaust survivors, and we have one mission: To bring them home,” Cohen said.

US military advisers have also urged Israelis to avoid an all-out ground assault in Gaza, and steer Israel away from the type of brutal, urban combat the US engaged in against insurgents during the Iraq War, in an effort to keep the Israelis from getting bogged down in bloody, house-by-house fighting, multiple sources familiar with the matter told CNN.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to tell soldiers on Tuesday a ground offensive was still on track, saying, “we stand before the next stage, it is coming.”

In a television address Wednesday, Netanyahu spoke for the first time since the October 7 attack about his own role in the security breakdown.

“Everyone will have to give answers, me too. This will happen after the war,” he said. “As the prime minister, I’m responsible to secure the future of the country, and now it’s my role to lead the country and the people for crushing victory on our enemies.”

It is a month since Hamas launched its unexpected and brutal attack on Israel. More than 1,400 Israelis were killed in the assault, and more than 240 were taken hostage, according to a count by Israeli officials. The Ministry of Health in Ramallah says more than 10,000 Palestinians have died in the military campaign launched in response by Israel.

Palestinian authorities don’t make a distinction between combatants and civilians but vulnerable groups — children, health workers and journalists — are among those who make up much of the grim and still growing death toll.

The conflict began when Hamas militants launched their deadly cross-border surprise attack on Israel on October 7, in what has been described as the deadliest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. In response, Israel responded with air and land attacks on the Gaza Strip, which have resulted in 10,305 deaths, according to a spokesperson for the Palestinian Ministry of Health in the besieged enclave. CNN cannot independently verify the numbers released by the ministry.

Thousands more Palestinians have been killed in Gaza in the last month than those who died in conflicts with Israel over the last 15 years.

**Children are nearly half of all casualties**

Gaza has one of the youngest populations in the world, with [47%](https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4484) under 18 years old, and the health ministry is reporting that as of November 6, 4,104 children have been killed. [UN officials estimate](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-30) that as of November 5, about 1,270 children have been reported missing and may be trapped under rubble

If the health ministry numbers are correct, the number of children killed since the conflict began has exceededthe number killed annually in armed conflicts globally in the past four years, according to UN data.

By comparison, 477 children died in Ukraine in 2022, and 83 have died this year as of October 8, according to reports compiled by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In the densely populated Gaza Strip, home to more than 2 million people, airstrikes have forced about 1.5 million people — about two-thirds of the population — to flee their homes﻿, according to UN figures.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) told people in the northern part of the Gaza Strip to evacuate to the south on October 13. Hospitals, shelters, schools and refugee camps are overwhelmed. A lack of electricity, [fuel](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/30/middleeast/fuel-gaza-crisis-map-dg/index.html), food and [clean water](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/middleeast/gaza-water-war-climate-intl-cmd/index.html) is creating a humanitarian crisis, UN officials have warned.

On October 31, an Israeli airstrike targeting Hamas commanders and infrastructure in Gaza’s largest refugee camp, [Jabalya](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/31/middleeast/jabalya-blast-gaza-intl/index.html), left catastrophic damage and killed many. The camp in northern Gaza was bombed for the second time the next day, killing [at least 80 people](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-01-23/h_682f206e2be38e21a900d89c78407589), according to the director of Gaza’s Indonesian hospital. According to a statement by the IDF, the initial airstrike killed several Hamas members, including Ibrahim Biari, whom it described as one of the Hamas commanders responsible for the October 7 attack on Israel. Hamas denied one of its leaders was present.

**Attacks on health care**

Attacks on health care can include incidents such as an Israeli airstrike that hit﻿ an ambulance outside the Al-Shifa hospital, the largest health facility in Gaza, which Israel said was directed at a Hamas cell. At least 15 died and 50 were wounded, according to the Hamas-run authorities in Gaza.

Health care attacks [tracked by the World Health Organization](https://extranet.who.int/ssa/LeftMenu/Index.aspx) canalso include threats and efforts to prevent people from accessing care, removal of health care equipment, and other forms of violence that affect health care.

A deadly blast at the Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza resulted in a large number of casualties. Both the cause of the blast and casualty figures are contested – the Gaza health ministry said 471 died, while an initial US intelligence assessment said the number of dead was between 100 and 300. Palestinian officials and some Arab leaders blamed an Israeli airstrike, but Israel said it was the result of a misfired rocket from the Islamic Jihad militant group, a rival to Hamas. A forensic CNN [investigation](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/21/middleeast/cnn-investigates-forensic-analysis-gaza-hospital-blast/index.html) concluded the blast was likely the result of a rocket fired from inside Gaza.

Ukraine experienced nearly 600 attacks on health care in March and April 2022, the first full months after Russia launched its attack on that country, according to WHO data. By comparison, there have been more than 200 such attacks in occupied Palestinian territory sinceOctober 7, but far more people have died.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah has reported 192 health workers have been killed and 113 health-care facilities hit. UN officials said 14 hospitals and 51 primary health-care centers are out of service as of November 6, due to damage from airstrikes or a lack of fuel.

**‘There is absolutely no safe space’ for journalists**

As of November 6, the Committee to Protect Journalists has tracked [37 deaths of journalists and media workers in occupied Palestinian territory](https://cpj.org/2023/11/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/) since Oct. 7, making it the deadliest period for journalists covering conflict since CPJ began keeping its numbers in 1992.

“There isn’t any real precedent for this,” said Arlene Getz, the editorial director at CPJ.

The single deadliest event for professional journalists was the Nov. 23, 2009, [killing of 58 people](https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/12/18/maguindanao-massacre-what-you-need-to-know.html) in Ampatuan town, Maguindanao, in the Philippines; 32 of those were journalists and media workers, [according to the CPJ](https://cpj.org/2019/12/ten-years-justice-maguindanao-massacre-impunity-journalists/).

“It just feels like there is absolutely no safe space,” Getz said. “It’s dangerous to go to a refugee camp to report, places that used to be safe to go to.”

CPJ is counting deaths of working journalists and media workers in the region as related to their line of work, which is the same way it handled the killing of journalists in Ukraine beginning in 2022. By comparison, 13 journalists were killed in 2022 in Ukraine.

Getz said CPJ sometimes struggles to confirm deaths because they frequently rely on family members for verification.

“Often, our sources for material like this, for confirmation of circumstances and deaths, are family members,” Getz said. “In attacks where families have been killed alongside the journalists, it can be hard to find people who can speak to it.”

Of those killed in Gaza, 32 were Palestinian, four Israeli and one Lebanese**,** according to the [CPJ’s latest figures](https://cpj.org/2023/11/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/). An additional eight journalists were reported injured and 11 were missing or detained.

From the [United Nations](https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144717) to [NGOs](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza) and even [influencers](https://www.instagram.com/bellahadid/), critics of the way Israel is waging war against Hamas in Gaza are not in short supply; even US President Joe Biden has decried its “[indiscriminate bombing](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/14/politics/biden-netanyahu-tensions-analysis/index.html).” But if there’s one area where Israel is arguably beyond reproach, it’s in the consistency of its stated war aims:

• Destroy Hamas so it can’t fulfil its goal of [repeating the October 7 massacre](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/).   
• Bring back the remaining hostages held by Hamas.

There are [other](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-war-aims-and-principles-post-hamas-administration-gaza) aims, such as reestablishing deterrence to Israel’s foes, and reassuring Israelis the state can still protect them. But those were the main ones – until last week.

In recent days, a third objective has unashamedly wormed its way into the open: getting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reelected.

It began in earnest about a week ago, when US calls were growing for the Palestinian Authority (PA), which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, to take control of post-war Gaza. Netanyahu’s response: Not on my watch.

In comments to lawmakers, the prime minister claimed the [Oslo Accords](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-draws-outcry-for-quote-equating-oct-7-toll-to-oslo-accords-deaths/) – a series of pacts between Israel and the Palestinians which laid the groundwork for discussions on a possible future Palestinian state, and which [he previously said he would honor](http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9607/03/netanyahu.lkl/) — had caused as many deaths as Hamas’ October 7 massacre, “though over a longer period”.

Later that day, Netanyahu – whose reputation as “[Mr. Security](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/10/middleeast/hamas-attack-crisis-benjamin-netanyahu-intl/index.html)” lies in tatters, and whose [popularity](https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-shows-gantzs-party-soaring-as-likud-nosedives-smotrich-out-of-knesset/) has plunged – was at it again.

“Gaza will be neither Hamastan nor Fatahstan,” he [said](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12/politics/biden-israel-losing-support-netanyahu/index.html), referring to Fatah, the largest Palestinian faction, which was instrumental in the signing of the Oslo Accords, and continues to control the PA, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

His ambassador to the UK was even clearer: When [Sky News](https://news.sky.com/story/israel-hamas-war-ambassador-says-israel-will-not-accept-two-state-solution-13029909#:~:text=Israel's%20ambassador%20to%20the%20UK,Austin%3A%20%22Absolutely%20no.%22) asked Tzipi Hotovely if Israel supports a two-state solution, she replied: “The answer is absolutely no

Why the focus on a failed, 30-year old agreement? “All Jewish Israelis are unanimous about the need to dismantle Hamas,” Yohanan Plesner, President of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), tells CNN. “Bibi [Netanyahu] needs to find a new raison d’etre to remain relevant. So he’s going back to the Oslo process.  
“He’s going back to the huge justified skepticism of any kind of solution that will hand over our security interests to the other side. And trying to position himself as … the guardian of those security interests. It’s a relatively shrewd political manoeuvre.”

Alas, says Plesner, it comes at the expense of the national interest. He believes that, in practice, there aren’t really any major differences in how the US, Europe or Israel sees the war ending (with the defeat of Hamas), or the interim stage that comes immediately after: witness the British and German foreign ministers’ call for a “[sustainable ceasefire](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/david-cameron-gaza-ceasefire-israel-palestine-war-s50x2kscw),” which, among other things, requires the pie-in-the-sky assumption that Hamas might lay down its arms. And so, says Plesner, Netanyahu is “trying to pronounce differences that are irrelevant at this point to improve his political lot.”

Or, to [put it](https://x.com/AnshelPfeffer/status/1734696741935501806?s=20) as “Bibi” author Anshel Pfeffer did on X, formerly known as Twitter: “What’s happening … is Netanyahu consciously squandering what little international support Israel has (mainly from the US) to continue the war against Hamas in a vain attempt to save his own political career by picking a fight with Biden.”

Netanyahu’s fortunes may be decided sooner rather than later.  
On Tuesday, Plesner’s IDI published a [survey](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-19-23/h_141df725f6421592017d449a00093221) that found almost 70% of Israelis want to see the country hold new elections as soon as the war with Hamas ends.

More worryingly for Netanyahu,the survey also showed 31% of his own Likud voters say they will vote for a different party next time (16% of those will vote for a different political bloc entirely).

Netanyahu, of course, has been written off before. He’s always proved the doubters wrong.

But after widely being blamed for the failures that allowed October 7 to happen on his watch, he now seems unable to fulfill one of his central war aims: bringing the hostages home. During the course of his government’s week-long truce with Hamas, 110 hostages were freed and 240 Palestinian prisoners released. But only one [rescue attempt](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/31/middleeast/idf-ori-megidish-rescue-hamas-hostage-intl-hnk/index.html) – that of female soldier Ori Megidish – has been successful. Repeated attempts to rescue others have failed, culminating in the IDF mistakenly killing [three Israeli hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/16/middleeast/what-we-know-hostages-killed-israel-gaza/index.html).

Even before that debacle, IDI found only around one-third of Israelis believe it’s possible to retrieve the remaining Israeli hostages, who number over 100.

That tragedy may in turn hamper Netanyahu’s ability to fulfil his other war aim of destroying Hamas. On Saturday evening, thousands of protesters descended on the renamed “Hostages Square” in Tel Aviv. They [demanded](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/12/17/exp-marquardt-pkg-israel-protests-121704aseg2-cnni-world.cnn) the prime minister and his government do more to bring their loved-ones home, and to make *this* the government’s number one priority – not the destruction of Hamas.

Ultimately, Netanyahu will probably do whatever gives him the best chance of staying in office. “It’s not power for power,” says Plesner.

“He thinks he has a hugely important role in Israeli and Jewish history. Legacy is extremely important. And he wouldn’t want his legacy to be the October 7 attack.” Like it or not, though, it almost certainly will be.

The truce that saw the return of 50 Israeli women and children from captivity in Gaza, as well as dozens of other nationals, has been extended for two more days, officials said Monday, as the hard-negotiated initial four-day pause concluded successfully following a late-night release of captives.

Eleven Israelis were freed by Hamas on Monday, the Red Cross and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said, bringing the total number of freed hostages to 69. Thirty-three Palestinian prisoners were also freed, bringing the total number of Palestinian women and children released from Israeli prisons over the course of the truce to 150. Several dozen truckloads of aid were also able to reach the besieged enclave in what had been the first respite for Palestinians in the nearly two months of war.

Qatar’s foreign ministry spokesperson Majed Al-Ansari confirmed the extension of the truce in a statement posted on X, with leaders in Israel and the US quickly welcoming the news.

Hamas said it agreed with Qatar and Egypt to extend the truce for an additional two days “under the same conditions reached before.”

Mark Regev, the senior adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, confirmed to CNN’s Dana Bash that a two-day extension had been reached, adding that it would go into effect after Monday’s hostage transfer was completed.

Regev said that under the agreement, Hamas will release 10 hostages each day.

“For every 10 hostages released, we’re willing to give an extension of another day, and if Hamas will release Israeli hostages as agreed, we will extend — that’s the bottom line,” Regev said.

Regev said he believes the hostages released over the next two days would be women and children.

“My understanding is that there’s still enough women and children in Gaza held by Hamas for the next 20 (releases),” Regev said.

Regev credited US President Joe Biden for helping arrange the parameters of the deal.

“These were negotiated with the help of President Biden and we thank him for putting his effort and his office behind these arrangements. I don’t think we would have reached the deal without his input,” he said.

In a statement, Biden praised the extension and said he has been “deeply engaged” as the truce has played out. He went on to thank the leaders of Israel, Qatar, and Egypt “for their commitment to this process and in reaching the agreement for an extension.”

“We will not stop until all of the hostages held by Hamas terrorists are released,” he added.

The White House also said they “hope to see” the pause extended further.

The announcement followed a call Monday between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the prime minister of Qatar, who helped broker the original four-day truce, according to a source familiar with the discussions.

The initial deal to secure the release of 50 women and children hostages was struck with the understanding that the cessation in fighting could be extended by additional days if Hamas was able to produce additional hostages, as CNN has previously reported.

Israeli and US officials believed that there were more women and children being held in captivity than 50, but agreed to the terms of the deal as Hamas insisted that it needed to use the pause in fighting to gather up additional hostages.

Two American women abducted by Hamas on October 7 are believed to still be in captivity, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told CNN Monday.

The White House had said three Americans were expected to be among the 50 hostages that Hamas would release over the course of the four-day pause, but only one – four-year-old Abigail Edan – was freed in the first period of truce. It was not immediately clear why the two women had not yet been released, and whether they would be released during the two-day extension.

An overwhelming majority of nations – 120 countries – voted on Friday for a United Nations resolution calling for a “sustained ﻿humanitarian truce” in Gaza, even [as Israel’s military announced it is “expanding ground operations”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/27/middleeast/israel-gaza-ground-operations-airstrike-intl/index.html) in the besieged enclave.

The announcement followed reports of intense aerial bombardment in Gaza, which Palestinian telecom company Jawwal said cut off its telecommunications network in the territory. An eyewitness at Gaza’s Al Aqsa Martyrs hospital described the situation as being “left in the dark with no connection to the outside world.”

Israel has vowed [to continue ground raids](https://www.cnn.com/israel-gaza-hamas-war-thursday-intl-hnk/index.html) over the coming days after ordering the [“complete siege”](https://cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-fighting-monday-intl-hnk/index.html) of Gaza in the wake of [Hamas’ October 7 terror attack](https://cnn.com/2023/10/10/middleeast/israel-kibbutzim-kfar-aza-beeri-urim-hamas-attack-intl/index.html) that killed more than 1,400 people and saw some 200 people taken to Gaza as hostages. Ongoing Israeli air strikes and a blockade of life-saving fuel have since sparked dire warnings for the fate 2 million people trapped in Gaza.

Israeli airstrikes have killed more than 7,000 people in Gaza since October 7, according to figures released Thursday by the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza.

In New York, UN member nations voted for a “sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities” in the war between Israel and Hamas, so that humanitarian aid can reach civilians in Gaza.

Ad Feedback

The vote outcome prompted a burst of loud applause in the assembly hall where delegates had gathered to vote and debate. The US, like Israel, has sharply criticized the effort and was one of 14 countries that voted against it on Friday.

Jordan brought the resolution to the General Assembly after successive attempts to call for ceasefires and humanitarian pauses failed in the more powerful Security Council.

The draft resolution calls for an “immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities,” as well as “immediate, full, sustained, safe and unhindered humanitarian access,” and asks Israel to rescind its order to evacuate northern Gaza. It also calls for “the immediate and unconditional release of all civilians who are being illegally held captive” but does not name Hamas as the captor.

While a general assembly vote is politically significant, it is not binding, and comes amid a lack of global consensus on how to resolve the crisis.

Friday’s resolution was criticized by the US and its allies for not explicitly criticizing Hamas. Canada’s last-minute amendment on Friday, which sharply denounced the militant group, failed to pass.

Israeli ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan called the resolution’s passing a “day of infamy” for the UN. “It is the duty of this body to call out murderous terrorists by name, not hide them behind empty words. Why are you defending murderers?” He asked.

Ahead of the vote, Jordan’s Foreign Minister urged others to support the resolution, warning on social media that Israel’s expanding ground operations “will be a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions for years to come,” Ayman Safadi said.

“Millions will be watching every vote. History will judge **Civilian toll**

Sewage is overflowing in the streets of Gaza and its population is facing the increasing threat of disease and hunger without access to outside supply lines, the United Nations has warned, adding that the [aid](https://cnn.com/2023/10/21/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-hostages-saturday-intl-hnk/index.html) so far permitted to enter Gaza amounts to “nothing more than crumbs.”

“Food and water are running out. The streets of Gaza have started overflowing with sewage. Gaza is on the brink of a massive health hazard as the risks of diseases are looming,” said Phillipe Lazzarini, the head of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

“The last remaining public services are collapsing, our aid operation is crumbling and for the first time ever, [our staff] report that people are now hungry.”

Some aid trucks have been able to enter Gaza through Egypt since the crisis began but Lazzarini said the deliveries were doing little to address the Gazans’ needs. And while the initial aid deliveries have provided some food, water and medicine, Israel has not allowed the import of [fuel](https://cnn.com/2023/10/25/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-war-wednesday-intl-hnk/index.html), which the UN says is “paralyzing” its aid operations. UNRWA officials said this week that without fuel, they would be unable to collect and distribute aid that reaches Gaza, warning they would be forced to “wind down” their relief efforts.

“We should avoid conveying the message that few trucks a day means the siege is lifted for humanitarian aid. This is not true,” Lazzarini added. “The current system in place is geared to fail. What is needed is meaningful and non-interrupted aid flow.”

A total of 74 trucks have entered the strip since humanitarian aid transfers resumed several days ago, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) said Thursday. Eight more trucks were expected Friday, the UN said, adding that previously 450 trucks were going in each day.

Israel says Hamas is stockpiling fuel for its own use and has called on the militant Palestinian group that governs Gaza to share it. IDF spokesperson Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus told CNN on Thursday that Hamas controls “between 800,000 and perhaps more than 1 million liters of fuel of different types stored inside Gaza,” according to Israeli military intelligence estimates. CNN cannot independently verify the amount of fuel in Gaza.

Lazzarini criticized Israel’s questioning that aid would be used solely for civilians, stressing that UNRWA has strict vetting mechanisms in place. “It pains me that humanitarian aid, a very basic right for people, is constantly questioned while at the same time despair is live streamed under our watch,” he said.

“All our vendors and partners are vetted against the sanctions list. We give aid to those who need it most. Our convoys and their routes are notified and deconflicted,” he said. “UNRWA does not and will not divert any humanitarian aid into the wrong hands.”

A 10-person team of medical staff and experts from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) crossed into Gaza Friday, the organization said in a statement, warning that “the humanitarian catastrophe is deepening by the hour.” The ICRC said it had enough equipment to treat several thousand wounded people and enough water purification supplies to treat 50,000 liters of water.

Aid group the Red Crescent Society said Friday that it has “completely lost contact with the operations room in Gaza and all our teams operating there” amid the telecommunications blackout.

**Finding the right words**

The deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza has sparked huge international concern but, nearly three weeks since the outbreak of violence, the world has so far [failed to unite around a common position](https://cnn.com/2023/10/25/middleeast/un-israel-spat-guterres-gaza-intl/index.html) on the crisis.

European leaders have stopped short of calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, instead appealing for humanitarian “pauses.”

The health ministry on Thursday published a [212-page report](https://cnn.com/2023/10/27/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-report-intl/index.html) with more than 6,000 names describes as “documented deaths since October 7” in Gaza. The ministry blamed the deaths on Israel’s “military aggression,” after Israel, along with the United States, expressed doubts about the casualty numbers being reported out of Gaza, without providing evidence that they are exaggerated. The list of 6,747 names gives the sex, age and identity card number of each of the victims.

“The maneuvering will begin when the conditions are right. These conditions are complex because so is the campaign. The troops are ready,” Gallant said in a briefing in Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, six people were injured when a rocket struck the Red Sea resort city of Taba, in Egypt, early on Friday, according to official sources cited by Egypt-affiliated Al-Qahera News.

The rocket hit an ambulance building and a residential area of the hospital’s administration in the city, which shares its border with Israel. It is unclear yet who fired the rocket

Hagari said at a press briefing Friday that Israel will cooperate with Egypt and the US to “tighten the defense in the region against threats from the Red Sea area.” Hagari said an aerial “threat” had been detected in the Red Sea area, which he said he believed was the cause of the strike in Egypt.

Israeli airstrikes rocked Gaza during a night of heavy bombardment after the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said Friday it is “expanding ground operations” in the [besieged enclave](https://cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-war-friday-intl-hnk/index.html), where communications links have reportedly been severed.

In a statement Saturday, the IDF said its warplanes hit 150 underground targets in northern Gaza overnight, striking what it called terror tunnels and underground combat spaces and killing several Hamas operatives.

Among those killed was Asem Abu Rakaba, the man in charge of Hamas’ aerial assets, who had taken part in planning the October 7 attacks on Israel and “directed the terrorists who infiltrated Israel on paragliders,” the IDF said.

The IDF is “operating forcefully” on all fronts and will “continue striking Gaza City,” IDF spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Friday, repeating previous warnings that civilians should evacuate as he announced the intensified ground operation.

Gaza residents told CNN that the evening’s airstrikes were the most intense they have experienced since Israel began to retaliate against Hamas’ October 7 terror attack around three weeks ago.

Speaking to CNN by phone from near Gaza’s Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, one eyewitness, Salem Ahmad Ammar, told CNN that he and his wife had decided to separate in hopes that one would survive to care for their kids.

“Don’t know if I (will) live to see the daylight tomorrow morning,” Ammar said. “I split from my wife, and the kids went to her parents’ house, and I came to the hospital here in the event we die in different places and maybe one of us would live and our kids will live. Difficult choices we are making.”

A substantial ground offensive has been expected ever since the attacks, in which Hamas killed more than 1,400 people and saw some 200 people taken to Gaza as hostages. However, it is not yet clear whether the IDF announcement of an expanded operation signals the start of that push.

Mark Regev, senior adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told CNN that an “expansion” of ground operations in Gaza means Israel’s army is “beefing up the pressure on Hamas.” He told CNN’s Jake Tapper “that pressure will increase and continue to increase until we achieve our goal.”

This is the third night of Israeli ground actions in Gaza, as it amasses thousands of troops on the border with the enclave. It comes after weeks of bombardment and blockading Gaza, precipitating [what aid agencies call a humanitarian crisis.](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-war-friday-intl-hnk/index.html)

Hamas has vowed to retaliate if Israeli ground troops enter Gaza. Izzat al-Rishq, a senior member of the Hamas political bureau, vowed that Hamas is ready to defeat Israeli soldiers if they enter the territory.

Ghazi Hamad, a senior Hamas official, told the [Associated Press](https://apnews.com/article/hamas-ghazi-hamad-israel-gaza-hezbollah-iran-ee10f09cf1ffe34ab68cff7987b49f53) on Thursday that Hezbollah and other allies were expected to play a bigger role as the Israel-Hamas war rages. “Hezbollah now is working against the occupation,” he said, adding a rare public appeal: “We appreciate this. But … we need more in order to stop the aggression on Gaza … We expect more.”

Concerns have risen that Israel’s army may target Gaza hospitals after it alleged that the enclave’s largest medical center, Al Shifa, is the site of a Hamas command and control center – a claim that Palestinian authorities in Gaza and Ramallah, as well as doctors at the hospital, have denied.

Hagari claimed Hamas of directing rocket attacks and commanding Hamas operations from bunkers underneath the hospital building, and appeared to suggest such hospitals could be on Israel’s target list. “When medical facilities are used for terror purposes, they are liable to lose their protection from attack in accordance with international law,” Hagari said.

The Director General of the Gaza Health Ministry, Dr. Medhat Abbas, told CNN’s Eleni Giokos that Gaza’s hospitals, “are used to treat patients only” and are not being used “to hide anyone.” Hamas also rejected the claim, calling on “the United Nations, Arab and Islamic countries to immediately intervene to stop the madness of bombing and destroying the medical system.”

Mustafa Barghouti of the Palestine National Initiative based in Ramallah said Israel was lying. “They keep lying to justify criminal acts against a civilian population, now they want to justify attacking people in a hospital” he told Sky News.

And Mads Gilbert, a Norwegian physician who has worked at the Shifa hospital on several occasions, including during three periods of open hostilities between Hamas and Israel, called the allegations “old.”

“We heard these unsubstantiated claims during the 2009 and 2014 attacks. We have never seen any single sign or proof, we’ve had zero restrictions on filming and photographing in Shifa, and have never been controlled in any ways,” he told CNN.

**‘The world is facing a historic moment’**

The intensified bombardment began Friday evening, local time. A CNN team on the ground in southern Israel, close to the border with Gaza, reported a series of large explosions rocking Gaza City in the north of the enclave, and “unusual, intense and sustained” military activity and hearing heavy machine gunfire.

Gaza appears largely cut off from the world, with communications in the enclave badly disrupted by airstrikes, according to Palestinian telecoms company Jawwal. London-based monitoring firm NetBlocks has also reported that the last standing major internet operator in the region, Paltel, has experienced damage to its international routes.

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh accused Israel of cutting communications and internet to Gaza on Friday in an “attempt to create darkness so that crimes can be committed” in preparation for an IDF ground operation.

“The world is facing a historic moment” Shtayyeh told CNN, and called on the global community to act to stop “aggression and massacres” to come.

Several aid organizations and UN agencies say they have now lost contact with local staff in Gaza.

Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the organization had been unable to communicate with its staff and “health facilities, health workers and the rest of our humanitarian partners on the ground.”

Catherine Russell, executive director of UNICEF, said on X, formerly Twitter, that she is “extremely concerned” about her team in Gaza after losing touch with them. “All humanitarians and the children and families they serve MUST be protected,” Russell added.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), also known as Doctors Without Borders, said it had lost contact with some Palestinian colleagues in Gaza, while the International Committee of the Red Cross said it was “deeply worried” for the safety of its staff and civilians.

“Without information in a communication blackout, people don’t know where to go for safety. Blackouts impede humanitarian and medical personnel from working safely and effectively,” the Red Cross said.

International news agencies also expressed concern after the IDF said it cannot guarantee the safety of journalists reporting from Gaza, Reuters reported on Friday.

At least 29 journalists have been killed during the Israel-Hamas war since October 7, making it the deadliest period for reporters covering conflict in decades, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

The continuous bombardment of Gaza since hostilities broke out after the bloody October 7 attack has led to a crisis in the impoverished and densely-populated enclave.

More than 2 million people are affected, the UN Relief Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) – the main UN agency in Gaza – warned on Friday, adding that amid food and water shortages, sewage is overflowing on the streets. More than 7,300 people have been killed and 18,500 more injured in Israeli attacks on Gaza since October 7, according to figures released Friday by the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah drawn from sources in the Hamas-controlled enclave.

The ministry says children, women and the elderly make up 70% of those killed.

Fifty-three UN staffers have also been killed since fighting began, with 14 dead in the past 24 hours, according to an UNRWA statement Friday.

Gaza hospitals have been forced to work with dwindling resources and power shortages; eyewitnesses at Al Aqsa Martyrs hospital said on Friday the institution had been plunged into darkness.

One eyewitness said Gaza has been “left in the dark with no connection to the outside world,” adding the hospital has received the bodies of 11 people killed and dozens injured from the intensified bombardment. They expect casualties to rise.

Another eyewitness, Alla Majhool, said she came to the hospital because her 4-year-old niece was injured in a previous strike.

“I am terrified and shaking, I can’t call my family and sisters to check on them, all we hear is explosions,” Majhool said. “It’s dark and there are no communications, we don’t know where the airstrikes and artillery shelling is hitting.”

The Palestine Red Crescent Society said it has “completely lost contact with the operations room in Gaza and all our teams operating there.”

Phillipe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA said earlier on Friday that while aid has begun to trickle into Gaza from Egypt through the Rafah crossing, deliveries so far amounted to “nothing more than crumbs.”

**Efforts to free hostages ongoing**

As the intensified bombardment began, Jordanian foreign minister Ayman Safadi urged nations to vote for a UN resolution calling for a halt to the fighting, saying on social media that the outcome of any Israeli ground operation “will be a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions for years to come.”

“Millions will be watching every vote,” he said. “History will judge.”

An overwhelming majority of 120 nations voted for the resolution, which calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities in the war between Israel and Hamas and for aid to be allowed to flow unrestricted into Gaza. The US and Israel sharply criticized the resolution text, however, for not explicitly criticizing Hamas.

Israel’s ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan asked the assembly, “Why are you defending murderers?”

“Israel just endured the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, and according to a majority of the so-called family of nations, Israel has no right to defend itself,”Israel’s expanded ground operation comes amid ongoing efforts to free hostages held by Hamas in Gaza. Earlier on Friday, [a source touted](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/27/middleeast/hostages-qatar-negotiations-intl/index.html) “significant progress” in negotiations.

When asked about a possible deal, IDF spokesperson Hagari told reporters to “disregard rumors.” He dismissed reports that a hostage deal was close to being brokered as “psychological terror and a cynical use of Israeli civilians by Hamas.”

The White House said it would not be appropriate to weigh in on Israel’s expanded military campaign.

“We have, of course, certainly seen Israel undertake varied operations on the ground in the last couple of days,” National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters Friday. “But again, we’re not going to get into the habit of chiming in from the sidelines here on what they’re trying to do on the ground.”

Kirby declined to say if Israel had informed the US before launching an expanded ground operation into Gaza Friday. He also declined to say if the Biden administration has confidence that Israel has fully considered the ramifications of a ground incursion.

But Kirby said the US had held “active conversations” with Israel about a humanitarian pause to allow for the release of hostages. “We are working as hard today as we were yesterday and the day before and the day before to get these hostages home,”

Six months into Israel’s war with Hamas, President Joe Biden is becoming ever more entangled in a foreign crisis that he cannot control but which is having deep consequences for US domestic politics and is weighing heavily on his reelection bid.

The omnipresent geopolitical risks of the war were thrown into high relief over the weekend with US officials warning of a potential retaliatory attack in the region by Iran after an [Israeli strike on Iran’s embassy complex](https://cnn.com/2024/04/02/middleeast/iran-response-israel-damascus-consulate-attack-intl-hnk/index.html) in Damascus, alongside pledges from Israel to escalate on the northern border with Lebanon – even as it continues its operations in Gaza to rout Hamas, the Tehran-backed group that killed more than 1,200 Israelis and took more than 200 hostage in its unprecedented October attacks. Talks are set to begin again in Cairo this week in the shadow of growing international upset over human consequences of the war, in which more than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed.

US forces in the region and Israel were on high alert for possible attacks by Iran in reprisal for the killing of two senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers in Damascus last week in a strike the US attributes to Israel. Any action by the Islamic Republic, against Israel or US interests could spark the full-scale Middle East war the White House dreads. Even if Iran doesn’t hit back, lower-grade clashes are already simmering across the region. The US has struck Iranian clients in Yemen, the Red Sea, Syria and Iraq, while Israel’s northern border, where it regularly trades missile fire with Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, is become increasingly dangerous. Israel is facing what its former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett told CNN on Sunday is an Iranian “octopus of terror.”

In another example of a drama any president would prefer to avoid in a reelection year, Biden is locked in a showdown with an Israeli prime minister. Benjamin Netanyahu did bend to his pressure after a [high-stakes phone call](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/04/politics/biden-netanyahu-call-wck-deaths/index.html) last week to open up new aid routes into Gaza. Israel also announced Sunday that it was [pulling back from the Khan Younis area](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/07/middleeast/israel-khan-younis-withdrawal-gaza-intl/index.html) in Gaza, leaving behind a moonscape of destruction. The moves followed a storm of international anger following the killing last week of seven aid workers, one Palestinian and six foreigners, including one American. But Netanyahu’s previous resistance to curtail Israeli operations despite Biden’s repeated calls means the administration has put him on notice that it could shift its own Gaza policy depending on how many Palestinian civilians are killed in the coming weeks.

The gruesome humanitarian crisis — which is helping fuel criticism of both Israel and Biden — is meanwhile reaching a point of no return. World Food Programme Director Cindy McCain told CNN’s “State of the Union” on Sunday that children are dying “as we speak” and that even if massive aid is pumped into Gaza, many will suffer a lifetime of medical after-effects. “We’re literally on the brink of going over the edge, over the cliff, with famine and not being able to recover from it,” McCain said, adding that the WFP had massed food for 1.1 million people just outside Gaza’s borders. “We just need to get it in,” McCain told CNN’s Jake Tapper. “That’s why these crossings are so important, and more crossings are needed.”

**Biden’s political backlash**

At home, Biden has been [facing a severe backlash](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/03/politics/biden-muslim-americans-gaza/index.html) from progressive, young and Arab American voters that could put his reelection hopes in several key swing states in jeopardy. Regular interruptions from hecklers and protests at his campaign events are providing a foretaste of the disruption that could cause a disastrous primetime distraction for the president at the Democratic National Convention if the conflict is still raging in August. Attempts by the White House to mitigate the problems last week only highlighted it when a [Palestinian American physician walked out](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/politics/white-house-ramadan-meeting/index.html) of a gathering with Biden intended to celebrate Ramadan, the Muslim holy month.

Now, Biden, who is instinctively one of the most pro-Israel presidents of the modern era, is facing increasing political pressure from Democratic officeholders, including some of his closest allies, to do more to rein in the Israelis by raising the prospect of conditions for billions of dollars in US arms shipments. Republicans meanwhile reacted fiercely to the president leaning on Netanyahu in their phone call last week, accusing Biden of deserting one of America’s closest friends. And ex-President Donald Trump, the presumptive GOP nominee, will be sure to twist any widening of the war to sharpen his narrative that things are tumbling out of control under his successor’s watch and that only he can stop World War III.

Biden’s call to Netanyahu on Thursday was the most significant moment yet in the President’s evolving handling of the war. Previously, he had repeatedly criticized Israel’s tactics in Gaza and called for the country to shield civilians but has been loath to unveil consequences for Netanyahu’s unwillingness to listen.

CNN’s MJ Lee [reported Sunday](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/06/politics/biden-netanyahu-israel-gaza-war-phone-call-details/index.html) that the president listed several things he needed Netanyahu to do immediately, including opening the Erez crossing in Gaza and the port of Ashdod in southern Israel to humanitarian aid. “Joe, we’re gonna do it,” a person familiar with the conversation said in characterizing Netanyahu’s response.

But Biden has an imperative political need for the war to end soon, reflected in his call for an “immediate” ceasefire. Netanyahu’s determination to flush out all Hamas fighters, even with an offensive in the Rafah area of Gaza that the US fears will be a civilian bloodbath, means tensions and distrust between the White House and Jerusalem remain high.

John Kirby, the White House’s national security communications adviser, told CBS’ “Face the Nation” on Sunday that the allies remain at odds on the planned incursion. “we have been very clear with the prime minister and his team that we don’t support a ground operation in Rafah, that there are other ways, other options that they need to look at for how they’re going to go after the Hamas threat that still is in Rafah,” he said. Kirby also downplayed the Israel withdrawal from Khan Younis. “It’s hard to know exactly what it tells us right now,” he told ABC News’ “This Week.” “They’ve been on the ground for four months. The word we’re getting is they’re tired. They need to be refit.”

**The threat of a new clash with Iran**

Weeks of no breakthroughs in tortuous ceasefire negotiations involving Israel, Hamas, key Gulf states and the US have reinforced the impression that the war is far from ending. Asked by CNN’s Fareed Zakaria whether Netanyahu is prolonging the fighting to head off a personal and legal reckoning, Bennett refused to break ranks. “I think that the decisions are being made for the right reasons. You know, one can disagree with one decision or another, but by and large the goal is to defeat Hamas,” he said. “We can’t finish this war when Hamas is standing. We can’t have an organization that explicitly said that it wants to destroy the Jewish nation and has done the worst thing possible and said that it’s going to try and do it again and again. So, we have to eliminate Hamas.”

The likelihood of the war dragging on will further frustrate Democrats who worry about its impact on Biden’s already fraying electoral coalition. [Israel’s attack on the World Central Kitchen convoy](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/04/middleeast/jose-andres-wck-israel-strike-criticism-intl/index.html) last week appeared to galvanize action in Washington a way that months of civilian carnage in Gaza had not. This may be partly to do with the influence of WCK founder, chef and restaurateur José Andrés, who has deep contacts in the US capital and a prominent international media profile.

“President Biden … you can and America will stand behind you, support the right of Israel to defend themselves on this massive attack. But at the same time, I would say that President Biden also can be defending and supporting the right of Palestinians not to die just trying to be getting a piece of bread,” Andrés said on ABC News. “You can be a friend of Israel, and at the same time, you can be telling your partner in the Middle East, you cannot be conducting war in such a way. You cannot be destroying every building, every hospital, every school, every university.” This encapsulation of Biden’s dilemma by the celebrated chef is one that the president has struggled to reconcile throughout the conflict and, despite his increasing attempts to sway Netanyahu’s choices, seems no nearer to resolving.

Since the attack on the WCK convoy, more and more Democrats have been signaling to Biden that his unwillingness to impose greater control on Netanyahu is unacceptable. Many of the public statements seem also designed as coded warnings to the White House about the political risks the president runs.

“I was glad to see the president, at least as reported out, finally say to President Netanyahu that, if you don’t follow my requests, that there will be consequences,” Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland told CBS’ “Face the Nation.” “You shouldn’t be shipping more weapons to the Netanyahu government when they’re not meeting their commitments, including the delivery of humanitarian aid, or if they’re not complying with international law.”

Van Hollen’s comments followed those of another key Democrat, Delaware Sen. Chris Coons, last week. Coons, who is very close to Biden, signaled openness to imposing conditions of how Israel uses American arms.

Biden is not alone in facing increasing political duress. Netanyahu endured a second straight weekend of mass political protests over his handling of the war and his failure to bring home more than 100 hostages who are still held in Gaza or are unaccounted for. The fragile coalition that keeps him in power is under stress from his left and his right amid growing calls from his critics in Israel and the United States for an early election.

Tensions with Netanyahu are playing out at the same time as both the Israeli and US governments are warning that [Iran may be poised](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/05/politics/us-israel-iran-retaliation-strike/index.html) to avenge the Damascus attack last week. In his comments to CNN, Bennett did not admit that Israel carried out the attack in Damascus but implicitly justified it.

“Iran is an octopus of terror. Its head is in Tehran and then it sends its tentacles all around Israel and the Middle East. In Lebanon, they have Hezbollah. In Gaza, they have Islamic Jihad and a bit of Hamas. The Houthis all around. And they’ve been pounding Israel using their arms while their head was sort of immune,” he said. “So the age of immunity for Iran’s head is over.”

Concern about a direct Iranian entry into the war crosses party lines in Washington. Ohio GOP Rep. Michael Turner, who chairs the House Intelligence Committee, was deeply critical of Biden’s stewardship of the conflict and criticism of Israel. But appearing on CNN’s “State of the Union,” he also appeared to criticize the attack in Damascus, which many observers see as a test by Israel of Iran’s red lines.

The strike, on what Iran identified as a consulate building in Damascus, was legitimate given the Islamic Republic’s record of fomenting terrorism, Turner said. But he added: “It still is very unwise. As we were trying to put pressure on Iran to keep them out of this conflict, both with US presence, and with our response to the attacks on our own troops, this certainly does escalate the issue throughout the entire region. “

Israeli ground forces are inside Gaza after entering the enclave overnight, as Palestinians experienced what they have described as the [most intense round of airstrikes](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/27/middleeast/israel-gaza-ground-operations-airstrike-intl/index.html) since Israel began its retaliation against [Hamas’ October 7 terror attack](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/28/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-war-explained-week-3-mime-intl).

Israeli forces “went into the Gaza Strip and expanded the ground operation where infantry, armor and engineer units and artillery with heavy fire are taking part,” Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Saturday morning.

“The forces are in the field and continue the fighting,” he added, without giving further details.

Hagari’s words confirm the military operation has undergone a significant expansion after what it had earlier described as two “targeted raids,” which took place on Wednesday night and Thursday night. Both those raids saw ground forces withdraw after a few hours.

However, it does not appear as though any major ground offensive aimed at seizing and holding significant amounts of the territory is yet underway. In a fresh call for Gazans to move south, the IDF spoke of an “impending” operation.

Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said his country had entered “a new phase in the war.”

“Tonight, the ground in Gaza shook,” he said in a statement.

“We attacked above ground and below ground. We attacked terrorist operatives at all levels, in all places. The instructions to our forces are clear: the operation will continue until a new order is given.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Saturday that the goals of this stage of the war are to destroy Hamas and return the more than 200 hostages the militant group took on October 7 and still holds in Gaza.

Netanyahu confirmed he spoke with family members of the hostages and said he vowed to them that he would exhaust all options to return their loved ones home.

Near the Gaza border, staging grounds once teeming with hundreds of Israeli tanks, armored personnel carriers and bulldozers have mostly emptied out when a CNN team visited.

CNN also observed some tank units returning from the direction of Gaza, back to their forward operating positions.

The IDF said on Saturday that its warplanes hit 150 underground targets in the north of the enclave, striking what it called terror [tunnels and underground combat spaces](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/15/middleeast/hamas-tunnels-gaza-intl/index.html) and killing several Hamas operatives.

Hagari said Gazans who had moved south of Wadi Gaza, a waterway bisecting the center of the strip, were in an area he called a “protected space,” and would receive more food, water and medicine today, though he did not give any details.

More than 2 million people live in the enclave, which spans just 140 square miles and is one of the most densely-populated places on Earth. For weeks, people living in the territory have faced Israeli airstrikes and a growing humanitarian situation, with shortages of water, food and fuel.

At least 7,650 people have been killed and more than 19,450 more injured in Israeli attacks on Gaza since October 7, according to the latest figures released by the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah, drawn from sources in the Hamas-controlled enclave.

**Mourning in Gaza**

Gazans mourned the loss of their loved ones on Saturday following a night of intense Israeli airstrikes, with many gathering at Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al Balah in central Gaza.

Video captured by CNN shows multiple bodies, including those of children, covered in white shrouds or thick blankets, placed on the ground in the hospital yard.

Dr. Khalil Al-Dikran told CNN the hospital had received 22 bodies overnight and hundreds of injured. He said people had brought the dead and the wounded to hospital using everything from bikes, cars and donkey carts.

Hospitals have lost contact with each other, he said, after communications networks were cut across the strip. “People are desperate to find some news about their loved ones and their families,” he added.

Al-Dikran said that after a pause of several hours, airstrikes had resumed again in central and northern Gaza, adding that artillery fire had continued uninterrupted through the night.

The IDF on Saturday conducted heavy artillery strikes against northern Gaza, with multiple explosions heard every minute.

A CNN team on the ground at an Israeli checkpoint near the strip perimeter witnessed intense and continuous explosions and air power. Smoke could also be seen rising from the enclave. Some of the explosions were so strong that the impact could be felt physically where the team was, around a kilometer (less than a mile) from the border.

The IDF reserve soldiers manning the position told CNN that Friday night was by far the most intense night of bombing.

Israeli troops have cleared out a large perimeter around the Gaza Strip, fearing incoming anti-tank weapons

**Aid agencies lose contact**

Communications in the enclave have been severely disrupted, leaving aid agencies out of touch with their staff on the ground.

The World Health Organization’s (WHO) Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter, on Saturday morning that reports of the intense bombardment are “extremely distressing.” He added: “We are still out of touch with our staff and health facilities. I’m worried about their safety.”

He said that it is “not possible” to evacuate patients or find safe shelter under such circumstances, and the “blackout is also making it impossible for ambulances to reach the injured.”

The WHO posted on social media that health workers, patients and civilians in Gaza spent the night “in darkness and fear” as they were “subject to a total communication and electrical blackout.”

The organization said hospitals across Gaza are operating at maximum capacity, unable to take in new patients whilst also “sheltering thousands of civilians.”

“There are more [people] wounded every hour,” the WHO said. “But ambulances cannot reach them in the communications blackout. Morgues are full. More than half of the dead are women and children.”

It reiterated a call for “immediate humanitarian ceasefire,” adding that safe passage must also be ensured for “desperately needed medical supplies, fuel, water and food into and across Gaza.”

Several United Nations agencies have also reported losing contact with their local staff in Gaza.

Elon Musk said SpaceX’s Starlink satellite communications network would support internet connectivity for internationally recognized relief organizations in the besieged enclave.

In response, Israel’s Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi said that the government “will use all means at its disposal to fight this.” In a statement posted on X, Karhi wrote there is “no doubt” that the service would be used by Hamas “for terrorist activities.”

While communications are largely severed within the territory, according to the local telecoms provider Jawwal, those with Israeli or international SIMs appear to have some patchy connections.

**Fate of hostages remains unclear**

The expanded operation has left families of the more than 200 hostages taken to Gaza fearful for their loved ones.

A group lobbying for the families of Israeli hostages spoke of “the most terrible of all nights” as emotions spiked with the IDF’s expansion of its ground operation.

“Anxiety, frustration, and especially enormous anger that none of the war cabinet bothered to meet with the families of the hostages to explain one thing – whether the ground operation endangers the well-being of the 229 hostages in Gaza,” said the Hostages and Missing Persons Families Forum.

Hagari told reporters on Friday that the IDF had notified the families of hostages about the expanded operations and reiterated the military was “committed to the national task of returning all hostages.”

Prior to the expanded ground campaign, diplomatic sources familiar with the Qatar-led negotiations to release hostages told CNN that [there has been “significant progress”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/27/middleeast/hostages-qatar-negotiations-intl/index.html) in the talks but issues still remained.

Majed Al-Ansari, the spokesperson for Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and advisor to the Qatari Prime Minister, told CNN’s Becky Anderson on Saturday that the escalation on the ground is making the situation “considerably more difficult.”

Qatar and Egypt have been mediating between Israel, the US and Hamas to release [the hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/politics/hostage-negotiations-hamas-israel/index.html) held by the militant group. Four hostages have been freed so far.

The White House said on Friday it was having [“active conversations”](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-27-23/h_84c4a0aa7d59643895fee16077858e5f) with Israel about a humanitarian pause to help get hostages out of Gaza.

In a Saturday news conference, families of the hostages said they told Netanyahu in a meeting they would accept an “everyone in return for everyone” deal, which would secure the immediate release of all hostages.

“We clarified to the Prime Minister that an immediate exchange of everyone for everyone is a deal the families would consider and one that has broad support from all of Israel,” family representatives said in a statement. “Bring everyone home now.”

Such an agreement would involve the release of hostages in exchange for Palestinians currently held in Israeli prisons. The Palestinian Prisoner’s Club, a non-governmental organization dedicated to addressing the concerns of Palestinian detainees in Israeli detention centers, estimates that this amounts to 6,630 people.

On Saturday, Hamas released a statement stating the group was “immediately ready” to engage in such a comprehensive trade, though this type of deal would be hugely controversial in Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu unveiled a plan for [Gaza’s](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/15/middleeast/gaza-history-explained-intl/index.html) future post-Hamas, which includes the “complete demilitarization” of the enclave, closing off the territory’s [southern border with Egypt](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/13/middleeast/egypt-boosts-security-border-gaza-israel-war-mime-intl/index.html), as well as the overhaul of Gaza’s civil administration and education systems.

CNN has obtained a copy of the plan, which Netanyahu presented to members of Israel’s security cabinet Thursday night. It was distributed as a basis for discussion, the prime minister’s office told CNN, in preparation of further talks, and comes after Netanyahu faced weeks of criticism for having no concrete plan for a postwar Gaza. The plan comes as Israel sent a negotiating team, led by Mossad Director David Barnea, to Paris on Friday to pursue talks over a potential ceasefire and [hostage release deal](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/middleeast/hamas-counterproposal-israel-pullout-ceasefire-hostages-intl/index.html) that may put an end to the four-month long war.

More than 29,000 people have been killed in Gaza since the war began, according to the ministry of health in the enclave. Hamas’ October 7 attack killed 1,200 people in Israel, according to Israeli authorities.

A number of principles are outlined in the document, from changes on the security and civil levels to more long-term plans about who governs the territory.

On the security file, the envisioned plan includes Israel closing off Gaza’s southern border with Egypt, giving Israel complete control of entry and exit from the enclave. At present, Egypt controls access to and from Gaza’s southern border via the Rafah crossing.

Netanyahu’s plan says Israel will cooperate “as much as possible” with Egypt, in coordination with the United States.

It is not clear whether Israel has obtained Egypt’s sign-off on that element of the plan, or any part of it. But an Israeli official told CNN that the plan was “aligned” with the US.

There has been no immediate official US reaction to the proposal.

The plan asserts, as Netanyahu has said before, that “Israel will have security control over the entire area west of Jordan,” which includes all of the West Bank and Israel, as well as Gaza.

The Palestinians have long sought an independent state in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza.

Israel will be responsible for “realizing and overseeing” the demilitarization of the Strip, the plan says, except for what is required to maintain public order.

On the civil level, Netanyahu details an overhaul of Gaza’s civil administration and education systems, including an apparent cut-off of funding from Qatar to Gaza – which a previous Netanyahu government [approved and facilitated](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/11/middleeast/qatar-hamas-funds-israel-backing-intl/index.html).

The local entities running the civil service “will not be identified with countries or entities that support terrorism and will not receive payment from them,” the plan says.

While it is likely a reference to Qatar, it is not clear if it would also apply to the Palestinian Authority, a revitalized version of which the US has said should run Gaza in the future

The Netanyahu plan also calls for “de-radicalization” in the education system, which Israel and its allies have long accused of promoting antisemitism and hatred of Israel.

The plan repeats that Israel will work to shut down UNRWA, the main United Nations agency supporting Palestinian refugees, and work to replace it “with responsible international aid agencies.”

Israel accuses about a dozen UNRWA employees of being directly involved in the October 7 Hamas attack. The agency employs about 13,000 people in Gaza.

Finally, the plan reiterates Israel’s insistence that it will not be forced by the international community to [recognize a Palestinian state](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/21/middleeast/netanyahu-palestinian-sovereignty-two-state-solution-intl/index.html), a possibility the United Kingdom and US President Joe Biden have begun to float.

“Israel outright rejects international dictates regarding a permanent settlement with the Palestinians,” the Netanyahu outline says, asserting that recognition of a Palestinian state now would be “a huge reward to unprecedented terrorism.”

**Is the plan realistic?**

Many of the proposals are opposed by key parties. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has already [rejected](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-23-24/h_8017e886e4dd5b743a9b74018df027d0) the idea of a buffer zone. Egypt has [rejected](https://www.dw.com/en/egypts-red-line-control-of-gazas-southern-border/a-68134206) the suggestion that Israel could control its border with Gaza. And the United Arab Emirates has said that without a clear roadmap towards an independent Palestinian State – ruled out by Netanyahu – it won’t help [foot the bill for Gaza’s reconstruction](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-a-e-links-support-for-rebuilding-gaza-to-push-for-two-state-solution-b878b433).

Netanyahu’s vow to eliminate UNRWA, the UN aid agency that supplies most international aid to Gaza, would have been difficult to achieve even before October 7. Now, as the UN warns that almost all of the population of Gaza is at risk of “[imminent famine](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/21/middleeast/un-food-convoy-gaza-israel-strike-cmd-intl/index.html),” the task would be enormous.

There is no mention in the plan of the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied West Bank. Netanyahu has previously rejected the suggestion that it could take control of Gaza. It is not clear whether he would now accept a reconstituted version taking over – and it is far from clear this would be accepted by Palestinians, more of whom voted for Hamas in elections in 2006.

For now, Netanyahu’s priority remains destroying Hamas and returning more than 100 hostages kidnapped on October 7 who remain in Gaza; getting hostage talks back on track is a key goal of the top delegation that Netanyahu sent to Paris on Friday. The US and others hope a deal will forestall a [ground operation in Rafah](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/middleeast/israel-rafah-ramadan-gantz-intl/index.html) that could push the death toll in Gaza to well above 30,000.

Most observers believe that once the war is over, elections in Israel are inevitable, which Netanayhu and his allies are [predicted](https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-1078520) to lose. But it is far from clear that a different leader – war cabinet member and former opposition leader Benny Gantz is touted as the favorite – would have much of a different vision for Gaza.

Israel and Hamas have reached a deal for a four-day pause in fighting and the release of at least 50 women and children held hostage in Gaza, marking a major diplomatic breakthrough nearly seven weeks after the start of a conflict that has spiraled into a grave humanitarian crisis in the enclave.

[The deal](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/21/politics/negotiations-israel-hamas-hostages/index.html), as laid out by key negotiator Qatar in a statement, would see hostages held captive by Hamas released in exchange for a number of Palestinian women and children in Israeli jails. The truce, meanwhile, would also allow the entry of “a larger number of humanitarian convoys and relief aid,” the statement said.

The starting time of the pause in fighting would be announced within the next 24 hours, the statement added. An Israeli official told CNN Wednesday that the truce is slated to begin at 10 a.m. local time (3 a.m. ET) on Thursday.

There is an option for the pause to last as long as 10 days, but Israeli officials believe it is unlikely to last that long.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said when the deal was approved that for every additional 10 hostages who are released, there will be an additional day of a pause in the fighting.

Ad Feedback

The US and Israel will also both pause drone flights over Gaza for six hours each day as part of the deal to secure the release of 50 women and children hostages from Gaza, deputy national security

Qatar’s lead negotiator Minister of State Mohammed Al-Khulaifi said the agreement should prompt the international community to “seize this brief window of opportunity to generate further momentum for the diplomatic track.”

The announcement has been greeted with relief and heightened anticipation from the families of those taken hostage, who now await further news about their loved ones.

It has also been met with positive reaction on the international stage. Egyptian President Abdelfattah El-Sisi reiterated Egypt’s commitment to finding a “sustainable” solution for the Palestinian people, while Qatar’s prime minister said his country hopes the development will establish “a comprehensive and sustainable agreement that will put an end to the war and the bloodshed.”

Jordan’s foreign ministry said it hopes the foreign-mediated deal will be a “step” that leads to a “complete cessation of the war” in Gaza. In Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov welcomed the deal, saying that Moscow views it “positively” and describing it as “the first good news from Gaza in a very long time.”

**How the agreement will unfold**

A source familiar with how hostages are expected to leave Gaza told CNN that the first swap is expected to take place Thursday 10 a.m. Israeli time. Some 50 Israel hostages – including some with dual nationalities – are expected to be released over the four-day pause. Ten is the minimum number of hostages to be released each day, but that could be higher.

“The first swap is the most crucial to see that the mechanism is working as was agreed,” the source said.

Every evening before the next day’s release, Israel and Hamas will give the Red Cross the list of hostage and prisoner names being released the next day, they added.

Hostages will be brought by the Red Cross to Rafah where they will be met by specially trained Israeli soldiers. They will verify that the hostages released were the ones expected and on the list. The families of the hostages will not be notified until the identities of the hostages released have been confirmed, the source said.

Hostages will then be taken by helicopter to several designated hospitals in Israel where there will be special areas and rooms for the hostages, closed to the public. There, their families will finally be able to see them after over six weeks in captivity.

Hamas is holding 239 hostages captive in Gaza, including foreign nationals from 26 countries, according to figures from the Israeli military. The mass abductions at gunpoint took place during October 7, when Hamas militants struck across the border in a coordinated and bloody surprise attack killing around 1,200 people – the largest such attack on Israel since the country’s founding in 1948.

Prior to the deal, only a handful of hostages had been released.

Israel responded to the attack by declaring war against Hamas and imposing a blockade on Gaza that cut off supplies of food, water, medicines and fuel, while launching a relentless air and ground assault. Some 12,700 people have been killed in Gaza since October 7, according to data from the Palestinian health ministry in the West Bank, which draws on information from Hamas-run health authorities.

The newly announced deal followed weeks of negotiations that included the United States and Egypt, and was approved by Israel’s cabinet in the early hours of Wednesday morning following a six-hour meeting an Israeli official described as“tense and emotional.”

Some 150 Palestinian prisoners would be released over four days during the initial hostage release if terms are met, the government said.

Just hours away from the first set of hostages being released from Gaza, US officials have a working list of 10 hostages that they believe are likely to be released on day one, a source familiar says. It was not clear whether any of the three American hostages – including 3-year-old Abigail Edan – would be released on the first day.

The deal is structured in such a way that each day, a group of hostages to be released would be handed off to the Red Cross; the Red Cross would then take the group to a designated border point, which will largely depend on the location of those hostages, the source familiar said.

Many of the first 50 hostages are expected to come out through Egypt, they said. The first two days of the hostage release will be treated as a “testing period,” the source said, to make sure the process is working. By day three, there is expected to be intense discussions about a potential second phase of the hostage release beyond the initial group of 50.

The deal followed mounting pressure on the Israeli government from the families of the hostages, who have demanded answers and action from Netanyahu. It also comes amid growing international pressure for more humanitarian support for the people of Gaza.

**Hostages’ families anxiously await the release**

Even as the details of the release remained unclear, some family members of the hostages held by Hamas expressed relief – and anticipation as they waited to learn whether their loved ones would be included in the negotiated release.

Anat Moshe Shoshany, whose grandmother was kidnapped from kibbutz Nir Oz on the back of a moped, said hearing of the hostage deal gave her “so much hope.”

“I really do hope to see someone walking out of there alive,” Shoshany said. “We want a chance to see our loved ones back. This is all we want and I really hope this is just the first step in this mess.”

Liz Hirsh Naftali, the great-aunt of Abigail Edan, the 3-year-old US citizen being held hostage by Hamas, told CNN that the situation has been “excruciating.”

“We have spent the last seven weeks, seven weeks, worrying, wondering, praying, hoping,” she said.

The family hopes Abigail, who is the youngest American hostage held by Hamas, can come home by Friday, her fourth birthday.

“We need to see Abigail come out and then we will be able to believe it,” Naftali added.

US President Joe Biden welcomed the deal in a statement Tuesday night in Washington, saying it “should bring home additional American hostages.” He pledge he “will not stop until they are all released.”

Three Americans could be among the 50 women and children freed as part of the deal, senior US officials said. Ten Americans remain unaccounted for, including two women anda 3-year-old girl, according to a senior administration official.The official didn’t name the girl.

A US official also said there are “various locations where the hostages will be brought out,” but declined to provide further detail.

The IDF spokesperson Conricus said the list of hostages to be released in the deal are all Israelis - some with dual nationalities. He added that the Palestinian prisoners set to be released are “not serious offenders.”

Israel on Wednesday released a list of 300 prisoners that could be released, leaving open the possibility of a second phase of exchanges of prisoners for hostages after the initial four-day period.

The vast majority of the Palestinian prisoners listed as eligible for release in an exchange for Israeli hostages are male teenagers aged 16 to 18 – children under the United Nations definition – although a handful are as young as 14. Some 33 are women, according to a CNN count.

The list of names published by Israel also lists the charges under which the prisoners are being held. Throwing stones and “harming regional security” are among the most common, but others include support for illegal terror organizations, illegal weapons charges, incitement, and at least two accusations of attempted murder.

The publication of the list starts a 24-hour period during which legal petitions against the release of Palestinian prisoners can be filed to Israel’s Supreme Court, after which point the process is expected to begin.

The total number of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails is approximately 8,300, according to Qadura Fares, the head of the Palestinian Prisoners Club, a non-governmental organization.

Of those 8,300, more than 3,000 are being held in what Israel calls “administrative detention,” which Amnesty International says can be extended indefinitely.

**‘Potential’ for longer pause**

The arrangement for a second phase of exchange built into the deal has the potential to create a longer humanitarian pause than just the four days originally stipulated, officials and statements from the US, Israel and Qatar have suggested.

“The hostages deal, as it is structured, includes a pause, a humanitarian pause over a number of days, four to five days at least. And there’s the potential with additional releases for that to be for that to be extended, but that will also be dependent upon Hamas releasing additional hostages,” according to a senior US official, who added this “incentivizes the release” of all hostages.

The pause will also allow for additional, much-needed humanitarian convoys and relief aid to enter the enclave.

Those would include fuel “designated for humanitarian needs,” according to Qatar, which did not provide further details on the volume of aid expected.

In its statement Wednesday, Hamas said the deal “involves the entry of hundreds of trucks carrying aid relief, medical supplies and fuel to all parts of Gaza.”

Israel has been highly reluctant to allow fuel into Gaza since October 7, citing concerns Hamas will use it to power its operations, and [only last week agreed](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-18-23/h_0d0f3845d4c5c44827ab6af9c7f9cd4b) to allow minimal deliveries to power sewage facilities and water supply systems.

Humanitarian groups have for weeks called for fuel to be allowed into Gaza, arguing it is critical for cooking food and maintaining operations at hospitals, which [have struggled](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/23/middleeast/gaza-hospitals-doctors-disaster-intl-hnk/index.html) to keep patients, including [neonatal babies](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/13/middleeast/gaza-babies-incubators-al-shifa-hospital-israel-intl-hnk/index.html) alive, amid power outages, supply shortages and bombardment.

Governments across the world and international organizations have also been ramping up pressure for increased aid deliveries to the struggling enclave.

Even though Israel and the US believed there were more than 50 women and children hostages, both sides agreed that they needed to move ahead with securing the release of those 50 – and hope that the deal might incentivize Hamas to release more after the initial group.

**Hamas goes dark**

But hours after McGurk’s meeting with Netanyahu, everything went dark.

The Qataris – who had been playing the main mediating role – couldn’t get a hold of Hamas. When the group finally resurfaced, Hamas threatened to derail the talks: It demanded that the Israel Defense Forces, which had gone in to raid Al-Shifa hospital, leave the hospital grounds. IDF declined but indicated that it would keep the hospital running.

Once the talks resumed, Biden – who was in San Francisco having just finished a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping – placed one more call to the emir of Qatar. His message: Time was up. The emir gave Biden his assurances that he would do everything possible to close the deal.

The next day, McGurk met in person with the emir in Doha to examine the text of the final deal that by this point was around half a dozen pages long. It laid out how women and children would leave in the first phase, as well as incentives for Hamas to release more hostages beyond that. CIA Director Bill Burns was dialed in to the meeting by phone.

Israel’s war cabinet approved the deal after making minor changes on Sunday, and the text of the agreement was passed on to Hamas for the last time by the emir of Qatar.

The emir made clear: This is the final offer.

On Tuesday morning, Hamas responded to their Qatari interlocutors: They approved the deal.

**A ‘pilot’ negotiation**

While efforts to negotiate a deal began in the immediate days after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, the groundwork for the deal started coming together weeks later, after the Biden administration had confidence that communication with Hamas via the Qataris was effective. Officials would later describe this as their “pilot” negotiation.

On October 23, the White House had successfully secured the release of two American citizens from Gaza – [Natalie and Judith Raanan.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/hamas-us-hostages-released-intl/index.html) As the mother and daughter made their way across Gaza, national security adviser Jake Sullivan, principal deputy national security adviser Jon Finer and McGurk were huddled in Sullivan’s office, tracking the Raanans’ movements in real time. Sources described their multi-hour journey as “excruciating.”

When the women arrived at the border, Charge d’Affaires Stephanie Hallett was waiting for them. At this point, Biden placed a call to Natalie Raanan’s father to share the joyful news, and later in the day, he would speak with both women.

That day would serve as proof to Biden’s top national security officials that the White House had successfully established a means of communicating and negotiating with Hamas via Qatar. And it triggered what would ultimately become the weeks-long effort to secure the release of a larger group of hostages.

**Foundations of a deal**

After the Israelis delegated the director of Mossad to negotiate on the hostages, back in the US, Burns, too, became intimately involved.

In Doha, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani engaged directly with senior Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh, a person familiar with the discussions said.

In multiple phone calls in October, Biden impressed upon Netanyahu that there was a path for a large group of hostages to be released. On October 24, Hamas appeared to agree to the parameters of a deal to release women and children hostages. American and Israeli officials furiously deliberated whether Israel should delay its ground invasion.

Ultimately, Israel wasn’t convinced. At this point, they still had no proof of life of any of the hostages that Hamas claimed to have, and they also didn’t buy Hamas’ claim that they couldn’t determine the identities of the hostages until there was a pause in fighting.

Israel began its ground invasion on October 27.

In the weeks that followed, the US, Israel and Qatar went back and forth with Hamas, negotiating with the group about every detail of a possible deal: the timeframe, number of hostages, safe passage corridors and surveillance.

Blinken returned to Israel in early November to press the Israeli government to accept “humanitarian pauses,” something that the US argued would advance progress on the hostages. Although there was an agreement in principle after Blinken met with Netanyahu and the war cabinet, the Israeli prime minister publicly rejected the idea just hours after that meeting. It took days of pressure from the US for the Israeli government to institute and acknowledge “tactical pauses.”

The talks at times seemed to move painfully slow, as each step of the communication moved from Doha, Qatar, or Cairo to Hamas in Gaza, then back again, before being relayed to Israel and the US.

“Every step of this is like pulling teeth,” [one official said at the time.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/09/politics/israel-pauses-gaza-white-house/index.html)

Behind the scenes, the hostages were the key issue that prevented Israel from initially agreeing to a humanitarian pause, because the Israeli government did not want to signal any kind of relief in exchange for hostages, a senior State Department official said.

Numerous different permutations of a deal were discussed.

Israeli and US officials initially insisted that all women and children come out in the first part of the release. Hamas would only guarantee 50 and refused to produce identifying information about the hostages. By the time that Burns met in Doha with the emir of Qatar and David Barnea, the director of the Mossad, the fact that there was no identifying information about the hostages was a major sticking point.

On November 12, Biden informed the emir of Qatar that the negotiation could not move forward without this information in what a senior administration official described as a “very important and very intense call.” Shortly after, Hamas finally relented, seemingly guaranteeing that any final deal would entail the release of 50 women and children hostages.

**Next steps**

While the deal reached this week only returns 50 women and children, US officials projected confidence Tuesday that the agreement will ultimately pave the way for additional hostage releases.

There are 10 Americans who remain unaccounted for, including two women and a 3-year-old girl. Pressed by CNN on the remaining Americans, a senior administration official said the White House remains “determined to get everybody home,” and suggested that the deal is structured to “very much (incentivize) the release of everybody.”

An agreement to release hostages from Hamas would “unlock the potential for delivery of more humanitarian assistance” into Gaza, State Department spokesperson Matt Miller said Tuesday.

After their safe passage, the released hostages will be given medical attention in Israel, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters, suggesting that some could have longer-term medical needs following six weeks in “abhorrent conditions.” Then there will be efforts to repatriate citizens to their home countries and connect them with their families.

For any American citizens released, Kirby said, after medical care is prioritized, the US State Department will provide consular assistance.

It could be 24 to 48 hours before the Biden administration has confirmation as to whether the two American women and orphaned American 3-year-old were among those released, one US official said.

Some [Hamas officials](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-attack-strategy-israel-mime-intl/index.html) are signaling that the militant group could give up armed struggle against Israel if the Palestinians get an independent state in territories captured by [Israel](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) in the 1967 war.

The messaging suggests a softening of Hamas’ position as its fate hangs in the balance with [Israel’s pummeling of the Gaza Strip](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/05/middleeast/gaza-war-no-plan-israel-intl-cmd/index.html), which Hamas ruled before the war. The Palestinian militant group has long called for the Jewish state to be destroyed.

Basem Naim, an Istanbul-based member of Hamas’ political bureau, told CNN on Thursday that the group would agree to disarm if an independent Palestinian state was established.

“If an independent state with its capital in Jerusalem, while preserving the right of return for refugees, (is created) Al Qassam could be integrated into (a future) national army,” he said, referring to the group’s armed wing.

Hamas has traditionally rejected a two-state solution that would see a Palestinian state established alongside Israel and has instead advocated the creation of a Palestinian state in all of historic Palestine that today encompasses Israel, the [occupied West Bank](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/17/middleeast/in-the-west-bank-an-independent-palestine-remains-a-distant-dream/index.html), occupied East Jerusalem and Gaza.

[Mustafa Barghouti](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/19/exp-israel-gaza-west-bank-barghouti-intv-101904aseg01-cnni-world.cnn), President of the Palestinian National Initiative, said he wasn’t aware of Hamas offering to lay down its arms before, but said it would be a significant move if true.

“It’s significant in the sense that Palestinians are resisting occupation because there is an occupation,” he told CNN. “If the occupation is not there, they don’t need to resist it,” he said, referring to Israel’s military control of territories captured in 1967, where millions of Palestinians live.

**Offer criticized as PR stunt**

Efraim Inbar, president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, said the demand for Palestinian refugees’ return to their ancestral homes in what is today Israel would be a non-starter as it would amount to “the destruction of the state of Israel” where Jews form a majority.

He characterized Hamas’ offer as a public relations stunt aimed at Western nations.

“They see that there’s a lot of support in the Western world (for the Palestinians)… and they try to show that they’re the good guys, and Israel are the bad guys, and Israel will say no,” he said.

The United States and European states may use this to ask Israel “to give them a chance,” he said, but Israel is likely to take the gesture “with a grain of salt.”

Indirect negotiations between Hamas and Israel to release the remaining 133 hostages have stalled.

US President Joe Biden, along with leaders from 17 other countries called on Hamas to release the hostages in a rare joint statement on Thursday, urging the group to accept the terms of a deal they say “would bring an immediate and prolonged ceasefire in Gaza that would facilitate a surge of additional necessary humanitarian assistance to be delivered throughout Gaza and lead to credible end of hostilities.

On Wednesday, senior Hamas official Khalil al-Hayya [told The Associated Press](https://apnews.com/article/hamas-khalil-alhayya-qatar-ceasefire-1967-borders-4912532b11a9cec29464eab234045438) in Istanbul that the group would accept “a fully sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the return of Palestinian refugees in accordance with the international resolutions.”

Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza in the 1967 war. Those territories are considered under international law and by most of the international community as occupied, and they are where the Palestinians want to establish a future state. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long opposed such a prospect, arguing that it would endanger his country’s security.

Naim told CNN on Thursday that Hamas seeks to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) provided that the group would undergo “reforms” in its charter and administration.

Hamas has refrained from joining the PLO, an umbrella grouping of Palestinian factions that signed peace agreements with it in the 1990s.

Barghouti said Hamas indicated as far back as 2007, when it led a Palestinian [national unity government](https://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/03/17/palestinian.abbas/index.html), that it is willing to accept a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders. Hamas, he added, has also been in favor of joining the PLO, but such a move wouldn’t automatically amount to recognition of Israel or the Oslo Accords that the PLO signed with it in the 1990s.

Hamas has not issued an official statement outlining the concessions its officials have touted and it is unclear if statements made by its officials abroad reflect the thinking of its military wing on the ground in Gaza

Laying down of arms “is certainly” the position of Hamas if the conditions are met, Naim said. Asked if that amounts to a shift in Hamas’ position, Naim told CNN the position is reflective of the group’s messaging since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

Israel has so far failed to achieve its stated goal of [eliminating Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/07/europe/israel-hamas-gaza-new-phase-war-intl/index.html) from the Gaza Strip, with no top leaders from the group captured or killed, but it has significantly diminished its military capabilities and its ability to rule there as its bombing campaign leaves the enclave in ruin.

Last week, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said at a news conference in the Qatari capital Doha that Hamas is willing to function solely [as a political party](https://twitter.com/trtworld/status/1780641148656116213) once a Palestinian state is created, citing meetings between the group and Turkish officials.

He called on Hamas “to express their stances clearly.”

Inbar, from the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, said that after October 7, Israelis treat Hamas as a hostile entity and want to see it defeated. “We understand that they will try to rebuild the military infrastructure” after Israel destroys it, he said, adding that Israel will continue to “mow the grass,” a reference to occasional military operations to diminish Hamas’ military capability.

The world is once again talking about a Palestinian state.

The issue has caused a deep rift between [Israel and its closest ally, the United States](https://cnn.com/2024/02/12/politics/biden-netanyahu-israel-gaza/index.html). US President Joe Biden keeps pressing for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejects any talk of an independent Palestine. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom said it would consider recognizing a Palestinian state, while Saudi Arabia insists that without a resolution to the statehood question, there can be no normalization of ties with Israel.

In all that back and forth about their future, the voice of the Palestinian people has been largely missing. Watching world leaders debate their fate, many Palestinians are not holding their breath. They’ve heard it all before.

Khalil Shikaki, the director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), said that most Palestinians are beyond the point of putting their hopes into statements made by foreign leaders, regardless of how friendly they might sound.

“No rhetoric, no matter from where, is going to be helpful at all to convince the Palestinians that there is a viable political process that could end the Israeli occupation and give them statehood in their own country,” he told CNN in an interview in Ramallah, the administrative center of the Palestinian Authority inthe Israeli-occupied West Bank.

“What they need to see is action on the ground,” he said. “They want to see Israeli occupation ending – and the two most important signs of Israeli occupation are the settlement construction and the control over land.”

Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza in the 1967 war. It later annexed East Jerusalem and withdrew its troops and settlers from Gaza.

Under the Oslo Accords peace agreement, the West Bank has been split into three distinct areas, depending on who is in charge. The plan was for Israel to gradually hand over control over more and more areas, but that has never happened. Israel has full administrative and security control over 60% of the West Bank area, which it continues settling its citizens in.

More than 700,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, land on which the Palestinians, along with the international community, want to establish a future Palestinian state, along with Gaza. The settlements are considered illegal under international law and are widely seen as one of the main obstacles to a two-state solution.

Netanyahu’s government, the most right-wing in Israel’s history, has been supportive of the settlements, offering tax breaks and other incentives to encourage more Jewish settlers to move to the West Bank. The state’s long-time position is that the settlements are not illegal and that the land isn’t occupied, because it was not a fully recognized part of a sovereign state before Israel took over in 1967.

And while the areas where settlements encroach on Palestinian land have always been prone to violence, settler attacks on Palestinians have spiraled out of control in recent months, raising the ire of the US.

This spike in settler violence against Palestinians – which has gone largely unpunished by Israeli authorities – has prompted the US to take a harder stance. Earlier this month, Biden issued an executive order imposing [sanctions on four settlers](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/west-bank-settlers-executive-order/index.html) accused of directly perpetrating violence or intimidation in the West Bank.

Diana Buttu, a Palestinian political analyst and human rights lawyer, who served as a legal advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team in the early 2000s, ﻿said the sanctions are a sign that the needle might be finally moving on Palestinian statehood.

“It’s slow, but it’s going in the right direction. And it’s going to pick up and it’s going to have a snowball effect and believe me, it’s already starting,” she said.

Buttu said the decision by South Africa to file a [genocide case against Israel](https://cnn.com/2024/01/26/middleeast/israel-genocide-case-icj-hague-ruling-south-africa-intl/index.html) at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over the war in Gaza was a game changer. In late January, the ICJ found in a preliminary ruling that South Africa had a right to pursue its case, and that Palestinians had a right to be protected from genocide. While has not yet ruled on whether Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, the ICJ said that “at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible.” It ordered Israel to “take all measures” to limit the death and destruction caused by its military campaign, prevent and punish incitement to genocide, and ensure access to humanitarian aid.

The ICJ’s decisions are binding, but it has no way of enforcing them.

“Israel will ignore (the ruling), but the world can’t,” Buttu said, pointing to large-scale demonstrations in support of Palestinians that have been taking place in cities across the world for months.

“We’re going to start seeing more action to hold Israel accountable. We’re going to start seeing more action to isolate Israel, to put sanctions on Israel, to not welcome Israel. It started already,” she said, referring to states that have put curbs on weapons sales to Israel.

But Shikaki said that while they are a powerful symbolic move, the sanctions against the four settlers won’t make most Palestinians believe the US is serious about a two-state solution.

“Unless the entire state of Israel is sanctioned, Palestinians will not see this as anything other than a simple token measure to deceive them,” he said. “The United States will have to take much more comprehensive measures against the entire settler population before Palestinians begin to see this as meaningful change.”

Sentiment on the streets echo Shikaki’s research. Rushing down the street in central Ramallah, just around the corner from a renowned falafel shop, 26-year old Sojoud paused to explain why she didn’t feel particularly hopeful.

“I don’t think it will get any better as long as there is the presence of the occupation and settlers,” she told CNN. “The political situation here is bad too. The Palestinian factions must unite among themselves before talking about a two-state solution.”

That view is shared by many Palestinians. A survey conducted by the PCPSR in December showed that [more than 60%](https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/963) of Palestinians want the Palestinian Authority (PA) – the interim government established by the Oslo Accords signed with Israel in the mid 1990s – to be dissolved. Meanwhile, support for the longtime PA President Mahmoud Abbas has collapsed.

“It has plummeted beyond what we have seen throughout his presidency. In the West Bank, 92% are now demanding his resignation,” Shikaki said. “Even within his own political party (Fatah), a clear majority wants him to resign.”

**Endless cycle of promises and violence**

Orient House in East Jerusalem, set in a lush garden just a short walk from the Old City, was once the unofficial headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The building was a powerful symbol of the Palestinians’ presence in Jerusalem and their aspiration for an independent state with the eastern sector of the city serving as its capital. It was largely here that the plans for a future Palestinian state and its institutions were drawn up.

Nearly 23 years ago, at the height of the Second Intifada, or uprising, Orient House was shuttered by the Israeli Police. The building now sits empty, the garden overgrown and a big rusting lock hanging on its ornamental gate.

Like many other Palestinian institutions and civil society organizations once based in this area, the tenants of Orient House have either been evicted or forced to relocated to the West Bank.

Just down the road from Orient Houseis PASSIA, or the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, one of the last remaining Palestinian think tanks in East Jerusalem.

Adnan Joulani, PASSIA’s executive director, said he believes the current calls for the Palestinian state are little more than an attempt by world leaders “to divert attention from the more pressing issue at the time, which is ending the fighting, ending the killing, ending the genocide of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.”

“The reason that I dismiss the idea that this is a sincere call for a Palestinian state is because I’ve seen it many, many times in the past,” he said, pointing to the periods of the First Intifada and the Second Intifada, which led to failed peace talks.

“Everybody was talking about a path to peace, roadmap to peace… if only the violence would stop. Well, guess what? The violence (did) stop and (yet) the idea of resolving the conflict died with the stopping of the violence,” he said.

“Because if it is true, if this conflict has really awakened a sincere desire by the international community, by (British Foreign Secretary David) Cameron and Biden, for the establishment of a Palestinian state, then unfortunately, this is a validation and vindication of the path of resistance by Hamas.”

The White House has set its sights on Israel’s settlers, a controversial movement that has grown in power over the years and is seen by the outside world as a major impediment to peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

On Thursday, the State Department announced the first round of [sanctions targeting Israeli settlers](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/west-bank-settlers-executive-order/index.html) accused of perpetrating violence in the West Bank. The sanctions block their financial assets and bar them from entering the US.

The sanctions mark one of the more significant moves Biden has taken to critique Israel since the Israel-Hamas war started on October 7, when the Palestinian militant group launched an attack on Israel, killing 1,200 people and taking more than 250 hostages.

Israel’s subsequent assault on Gaza has so far led to the death of more than 27,000 Palestinians in the territory. Much less in the public eye, during that period, at least 370 Palestinians have been killed in the occupied West Bank, including 94 children. Almost all of them were killed by Israeli troops, but [settler violence](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/middleeast/west-bank-settler-attacks-israel-cmd-intl/index.html) in the West Bank has also jumped sharply since the war began, with settlers burning cars, destroying infrastructure and assaulting and killing Palestinians.

Since the war, the White House has doubled down on a longstanding US position supporting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejects.

Only four settlers were targeted in the US move. But there are 700,000 of them living in the West Bank and, according to the international community, the presence of every one of them there is illegal. The Palestinians want the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza for a future state, a position that is supported by much of the rest of the world.

Here’s all you need to know about Jewish settlers and why they’re so controversial.

**What are West Bank settlements?**

During the 1967 war, Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Soon after, it began establishing Israeli communities in those territories.

Today, it retains control of East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the West Bank, and imposes a land and maritime siege on Gaza. Those territories are considered by the international community as occupied by Israel.

The West Bank is home to [3.3 million](https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang__en/881/default.aspx#Population) Palestinians and it is where the bulk of Jewish settlements are. Israel has continued to expand settlements over decades despite signing a series of peace agreements with the Palestinians in 1990s called the Oslo Accords that envisaged the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as part of a negotiated resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There are [146 settlements](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population) dotted throughout the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem), many of which encroach on Palestinian villages and, in some cases, privately owned Palestinian land. Some are built in close proximity to Palestinian population centers and one, [in Hebron](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/23/middleeast/israel-palestine-west-bank-hebron-collective-punishment-intl/index.html), sits in the heart of a Palestinian town. In East Jerusalem, there are [14 Israeli neighborhoods](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/jerusalem), which the international community considers illegal.

The prevalent view among the Palestinians and Israel’s allies in the West is that the settlements are a major obstacle to peace, making a contiguous, whole Palestinian state in the West Bank impossible.

**Who are the settlers?**

Settlers are Jewish Israelis who live in the Israeli-occupied territories, mostly in communities built by the Israeli government. Many of them are ideologically driven and believe they have a divine right to live on the land as stipulated by the bible, though other settlers opt to live in the West Bank because it offers a lower cost of living and the Israeli government subsidizes housing costs. There are more than 450,000 Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank.

Settlers in the West Bank fall under Israeli civilian rule and have their own road and transportation networks, while Palestinian residents fall under Israeli military rule, are forced to go through Israeli military checkpoints, and are largely barred from entering Jewish settlements. The dual system – one for Jews and one for Palestinians – has been criticized by Israeli and international humanitarian groups as being a [system of apartheid](https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/01/middleeast/israel-apartheid-amnesty-intl/index.html), a charge Israel strongly denies.

Many of the [settlers are armed](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/14/middleeast/israel-guns-hamas-far-right/index.html) and some have engaged in [deadly attacks against Palestinian](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/15/middleeast/huwara-west-bank-settler-attack-cmd-intl/index.html) civilians. Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, at least eight Palestinians have been killed in settler attacks.

The influence of settlers in Israeli politics has grown tremendously over the years. The current Israeli coalition government includes two settler-backed parties, both of whose leaders live in the West Bank and have pushed for the expansion of Jewish communities in occupied territory.

Calls for [Jews to resettle Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/17/middleeast/israel-far-right-gaza-settler-movement-cmd-intl/index.html) have also picked up steam since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, supported by some Israeli ministers, but Israel has said its official position remains that it does not plan to re-occupy or settle the territory.

**How much of the West Bank does Israel control?**

After Israel signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians, an interim Palestinian government was established in the West Bank and Gaza, known as the Palestinian Authority (PA), based in the city of Ramallah. That treaty split the West Bank into three areas: A, B and C. The PA formally retains full administrative and security control of Area A, which accounts for 18% of the territory. In Area B, which makes up 22%, the PA has administrative control while Israel has security control. And in Area C, which is 60% of the West Bank, Israel retains full security and administrative control.

**What are settlement outposts?**

While all Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank are considered illegal under international law and by much of the international community, Israel distinguishes settlements it has authorized from those it hasn’t. The vast majority of settlements are built by government order, but some unauthorized settlements, known as settlement outposts, have been established by ideologically- driven Israeli civilians with the hope that they will one day be authorized by the government. Israel occasionally cracks down on them, but it [often retroactively legalizes](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population) them once they grow into communities.

There are [144 outposts](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population) in the West Bank, according to Israeli rights group Peace Now. More than [20,000 Israelis](https://israelpolicyforum.org/west-bank-settlements-explained) live in them, according to the Israel Policy Forum.

**What is the legal status of settlements?**

The settlements are illegal under international law. The Fourth Geneva Convention, which concerns civilian populations during a time of war, states in Article 49 that, “The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.”

United Nations Security Council resolution 2334, [which the United States did not veto](https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/26/politics/understanding-unsc-resolution/index.html), and was passed in December 2016, reaffirms this position. It states that settlements have “no legal validity” and constitute “a flagrant violation under international law.” The resolution references previous Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 446, 452, 465, 476, 478, 1397, 1515, and 1850. Of these, 465, 476, and 478 established that settlements have “no legal validity” in 1980.

Israel, along with a few legal analysts, disputes that settlements are illegal.

In 2012, the Israeli government, under the direction of Prime Minister Netanyahu, published the Levy Commission Report, which summarized this legal position. The report rejected the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the West Bank, arguing that the West Bank was never a legitimate part of any Arab state.

“Consequently, those conventions dealing with the administration of occupied territory and an occupied populations [sic] are not applicable to Israel’s presence in Judea and Samaria (West Bank),” the report read.

This is not a position that any country or international forum has accepted.

Ibrahim Wadi, 62, and his son Ahmad, 24, were on their way to a funeral for four Palestinians shot dead by Israeli settlers in their occupied West Bank community, when their car came under attack.

The father and son were driving through the small village of Qusra, just south of Nablus, which has become a focal point of violence over recent days, when they themselves were fired upon by armed settlers on Thursday. Family members told CNN that the men were transferred to a nearby hospital and died of their wounds soon after.

They are among at least 61 people, including children, to be killed in the occupied West Bank since October 7, when Hamas launched its unprecedented, [surprise assault on Israel,](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/hamas-training-site-gaza-israel-intl/index.html) according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health there. More than 1,250 have been injured.

Hamas’ attack has left more than 1,400 people dead in Israel, mostly civilian, with at least 199 believed to be held hostage inside Gaza, according to Israeli authorities.

Israel announced a “complete siege” of the enclave in response, carrying out widespread airstrikes across the Gaza Strip that left at least 3,478 people dead and threatening a ground invasion, according to the health ministry in Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas. Meanwhile, tensions are mounting in the West Bank, where Palestinians have been killed in confrontations with both Israeli forces and settlers.

Hani Odeh, Qusra’s mayor, told CNN that settlers roam freely in the village under the protection of Israeli police. He said he had informed a member of COGAT, Israel’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, that he was going to attend the funeral, along with Ahmad and Ibrahim.

A few hours beforehand, the Israeli official told him to take a different route than the one they would usually take, to avoid settlers in the area. But to Odeh’s surprise, the road to which they were diverted was filled with settlers, who eventually shot and killed Ahmad and Ibrahim in their car.

Odeh told CNN he watched the attack happen from his own vehicle while Israeli soldiers patrolled the street. He went up to one officer, urging him to disperse the settlers, but no one did anything. He said it felt like a trap.

CNN reached out to COGAT and the IDF for comment on Odeh’s claims but have yet to receive a response.

Brig. Gen. Daniel Hagari, the Israeli military’s spokesperson, said last week that the military was on high alert in the occupied territory, adding it was preparing to thwart any potential attacks. “Anyone who challenges us in Judea and Samaria will be met with huge force,” Hagari said, using the Jewish biblical names for the West Bank.

**A surge of attacks**

CNN spoke with residents in the West Bank who say they are fearful of a wave of violence from the Israeli military and security forces, as well as revenge attacks by the estimated 700,000 Israeli settlers living in the area. The latest killings come against [the backdrop](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/15/middleeast/huwara-west-bank-settler-attack-cmd-intl/index.html) of a year in which the West Bank has seen a surge in settler attacks, including one that an Israeli military commander called a “pogrom.”

Even before the war with Hamas, the West Bank had been boiling. Following a wave of Palestinian attacks on Israelis last year, Israel launched regular incursions and raids into the West Bank targeting what they said were militant strongholds. The resulting violence left a record number of both Palestinians and Israelis dead, numbers not seen in at least a decade.

Days after the deadly violence in Qusra, home to around 7,000 people, residents are still reeling. Photographs commemorating the six people who were killed plaster the walls of homes and buildings. A bleak emptiness fills the air.

Torched cars, broken water pumps and ransacked electricity lines surround an apartment building on the edge of the village where the first four killings took place. Inside the floor is littered with glass, and bullet marks scar the walls.

Armed settlers attacked the building on October 11, triggering calls for help from residents. When several neighbors arrived at the scene, the settlers opened fire and four people were shot dead: Musa’ab Abu Raidi, 19, Obaida Abu Srour, 18, Hassan Muhannad, 22, and Moath Odesa, 29.

Inside the apartment building, Rabeea, 19, and her brother, Abdulrahman, 12, watched with horror as the attack unfolded. The siblings, who asked that CNN not use their last name for fear of reprisals from Israeli settlers, recounted how settlers lobbed rocks and fired at the building as they hid inside with their mother.

Their older brother and his 6-year-old daughter were injured and receiving treatment at a hospital nearby. Odeh, the mayor, told CNN that they were among 12 people to be hospitalized after the attack.

Rabeea said her brother can’t sleep at night; he’s too scared to be alone. CNN met the family as they were packing up their things and getting ready to move to another village.

“I feel so bad. I want to cry but, what can we do?” she said. “I want to stay here but we can’t do anything.”

They’ve been here before. Seven years ago, Rabeea and Abdulrahman said their father was shot dead by Israeli settlers near Nablus. The fear of being attacked forced their family to pick up and move to Qusra. Now, too scared to stay, they are being driven from their home again.

Since Israel took control and occupied the West Bank in 1967 from Jordan following the six-day war, the territory, which residents hope will form part of a future Palestinian state, has been settled by Israeli civilians, often under military protection.

Most of the world considers these settlements illegal under international law, but despite this successive Israeli governments have pledged support for them. Israel [views](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/15/middleeast/huwara-west-bank-settler-attack-cmd-intl/index.html) the West Bank as “disputed territory,” and contends its settlement policy is legal.

This year, following the election of the most right-wing, extremist government in Israeli history under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, violence between settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank flared.

As of mid-September this year, [the United Nations](https://www.ochaopt.org/poc/5-18-september-2023) had reported 798 settler-related incidents in the occupied territory, leading to 216 Palestinians injured. In the same period, Israeli forces killed 179 Palestinians in the West Bank.

The IDF says most are terror suspects or people engaging violently with its troops during raids, but does not offer evidence in every case for this assertion.

Settlers have long been accused of carrying out acts of violence against Palestinians. As well as killings, these attacks have included incidents of physical assault, property damage and harassment.

Odeh insisted their aim is to drive Palestinians from their home and ultimately from the occupied West Bank.

**Record housing approvals**

This year, in the wake of international criticism, Netanyahu instructed Jewish settlers not to grab land in the West Bank without the Israeli government’s permission. But under his leadership, Israel has approved a record number of housing units in West Bank settlements.

Members of his far-right government, including National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who are themselves settlers, have been accused of inciting violence against Palestinians since taking power.

In the wake of Hamas’ attack on October 7, Palestinians are being subjected to tight restrictions on movement within the West Bank and between the West Bank and Israel, with Israeli military forces imposing a full closure of checkpoints and roadblocks, according to several residents who spoke to CNN.

Palestinians living in the West Bank told CNN the closure has significantly impacted their daily lives, restricting their ability to travel for work, school, medical treatment and other essential activities.

In a call with US President Joe Biden on Saturday, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas demanded an end to settler attacks against people in Palestinian cities, villages and refugee camps in the West Bank, while stressing the need to stop the killing of civilians on both sides.

At the home of Ibrahim and Ahmad, who lived a short drive away from the apartment building that was attacked in Qusra, and in full view of an encroaching Israeli settlement, their family – wives, daughters, and sisters – were in mourning on Sunday.

“Thank God, we are strong. And God willing, we will continue to have strength and patience,” Khitam Wadi, Ibrahim’s wife and Ahmad’s mother, told CNN.

“My husband loved his land. He defended his land. And we will continue to do the same so long as we are alive,” she added.

Evidently shaken, Khitam found it hard to describe her grief. But the younger women in the family, while in pain, were adamant on standing their ground.

“I’m sad, of course. This all affects me, but not to the extent that it weakens me. We’ve been experiencing the same thing our entire lives, nothing has changed,” Aseel, Ahmad’s sister and Ibrahim’s daughter, said.

“This is our home. My dad taught me to love my land. I will teach my kids the same. And I will stay for as long as I live.”

Israel’s strategy for defeating Hamas — destroying its military and political capabilities to the point where the terrorist group can never again launch major attacks against Israeli civilians — is unlikely to work.

Indeed, Israel is likely already producing more terrorists than it’s killing.

To defeat terrorist groups like Hamas, it is important to separate the terrorists from the local population from which they emerge. Otherwise, the current generation of terrorists can be killed, only to be replaced by a new, larger generation of terrorists in the future. (This is described by experts as [“counterinsurgency mathematics.”](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/10/01/gen_mcchrystals_address_on_afghanistan_98537.html) )

Although the principle — of separating the terror group from the broader population — is simple, it is incredibly difficult to achieve in practice.

This is why Israel and the United States have waged major military operations that killed large numbers of existing terrorists in the near term — but ultimately led to the rise of many more terrorists, often in a matter of months.

Exactly this pattern happened in the past when:

**Israel invaded Southern Lebanon with some** [**78,000 combat troops and almost 3,000 tanks and armored vehicles**](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=gxE5O_3JTgYC&pg=PT140&lpg=PT140&dq=Operation+Peace+for+Galilee:+The+Israeli-PLO+War+in+Lebanon+78,000&source=bl&ots=iZsBchVjeo&sig=ACfU3U1hLeiUQOsCBUwVs_lWxutOiYGhwA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiAt_LDrKCCAxWRHsAKHbJIBMA4ChDoAXoECAIQAw#v=onepage&q=Operation%20Peace%20for%20Galilee%3A%20The%20Israeli-PLO%20War%20in%20Lebanon%2078%2C000&f=false) **in June 1982.**

The goal was to smash PLO terrorists, and Israel achieved significant near-term success. However, this military operation caused the [creation of Hezbollah in July 1982](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hezbollah), led to vast local support for Hezbollah and waves of suicide attacks and ultimately led to the withdrawal of Israel’s army from much of southern Lebanon in 1985 and the growth of Hezbollah ever since.

**Israel maintained a heavy military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank from the early 1990s to 2005.**

These [operations](https://boi.org.il/media/dtmpopvw/dp0502e.pdf) succeeded in killing many terrorists from Hamas and other Palestinian groups, but also triggered vast local support for the terrorist groups and massive campaigns of suicide attacks against Israelis that stopped only when the heavy Israeli military forces left. Far from defeated, Hamas [won the 2006 Palestinian elections](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/1/26/hamas-wins-huge-majority)

**Israel launched a ground offensive into Lebanon in July-August 2006.**

Although the goal was to completely destroy Hezbollah’s leaders and fighters so that it could never again kidnap Israeli soldiers and launch missiles at Israeli cities, the Israeli offensive failed, and Hezbollah is [vastly stronger today as a result.](https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1352664/we-are-much-stronger-than-in-2006-hezbollah-has-become-the-worlds-largest-army.html)

**The United States invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003 with 150,000 combat troops.**

American forces completely defeated Saddam Hussein’s army [within 6 weeks](https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war). However, these heavy military operations led to [the largest suicide terrorist campaign in modern times](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/126478/dying-to-win-by-robert-a-pape/), a major civil war in Iraq and ultimately, the rise of ISIS

**Is history repeating in Gaza 2023?**

In Gaza, this tragic pattern is probably already happening. Right now, we are witnessing not the separation of Hamas and the local population, but the growing integration of the two, with likely growing recruitment for Hamas.

The Israeli order for [1.1 million Palestinians](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/13/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-war-friday-intl-hnk/index.html) — the population of northern Gaza — to move south is not going to create meaningful separation between the terrorists and the population.

Many thousands cannot move because they are too young, too old, or too sick or injured and [dependent on specialized care and hospitals](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/15/world/middleeast/israel-gaza.html). Hence, evacuating the entire civilian population of northern Gaza is not possible. Even if the civilian population did move, many Hamas fighters would simply go with them.

Moreover, [Hamas has ordered civilians not to evacuate](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-tells-gaza-residents-stay-home-israel-ground-offensive-looms-2023-10-13/). Since Hamas and the civilian population remain tightly integrated, it is no surprise that Israeli operations to kill Hamas terrorists has led to the [death of over 8,000 civilians](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-30-23/h_647d02c9e96a737aead7f2ae5a467e75), according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah, citing sources from Hamas-controlled Gaza. Virtually all have family members who are already [likely being recruited by Hamas in large numbers](https://www.cnn.com/videos/business/2023/10/18/hamas-social-media-israel-war-osullivan-ebof-vpx.cnn).

We should expect that Hamas is thus growing stronger, not weaker, with every passing day.

**So, what does work?**

To defeat terrorist groups, it is crucial to engage in long campaigns of selective pressure, over years, not simply a month (or two, or three) of heavy ground operations, and to combine military operations with political solutions from early on.

Indeed, the very effort to finish off the terrorists in just a month or two militarily with little idea of the political outcome — as Israel appears to be doing now — is what ends up producing more terrorists than it kills.

The only way to create lasting damage to terrorists is to combine, typically in a long campaign of years, sustained selective attacks against identified terrorists with political operations that drive wedges between the terrorists and the local populations from which they come.

Israel is [drawing comparisons with the defeat of ISIS](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/26/middleeast/israel-military-trap-hamas-battle-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html), but it is important to remember that Muslim ground forces made an enormous difference by applying military pressure against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, over years, in ways that did not galvanize the local population to replace them, by allowing the local populations to effectively govern the area cleansed of terrorists.

The campaign that defeated ISIS joined military and political operations together practically from the beginning.

Going forward, Israel needs a new strategic conception for defeating Hamas. The only viable way to separate Hamas from the local population is politically.

Israel’s strategic vision has been to go in heavily militarily first and then figure out the political process later. But this is likely to integrate Hamas and the local population together more and more and to produce more terrorists than it kills.

Furthermore, Israel doesn’t appear to have a political plan for the period after eliminating Hamas. Since 2006, Hamas has been the only government in Gaza. [Israel claims it does not want to govern Gaza](https://www.npr.org/2023/10/30/1209386702/israel-increases-operations-in-gaza-to-achieve-its-stated-goal-of-destroying-ham), but Gaza will need to be governed, and Israel has yet to explain what a post-Hamas Gaza will look like.

What will prevent Hamas 2.0 from filling the power vacuum? Given the absence of serious political alternatives to Hamas, why should Palestinians abandon Hamas?

There is an alternative: now, not later, start the political process toward a pathway to a Palestinian state, and create a viable political alternative for Palestinians to Hamas.

This could, over time, separate Hamas from the local population more and more, and so lead to significant success. It must be the Palestinians who decide who leads Gaza.

This new strategic conception is the best way to defeat Hamas, secure Israel’s population and advance America’s interests in the region

It will be long, bloody, and complicated. That’s the way two leading experts on urban warfare described the prospect of a ground attack by Israel on Hamas’ base in the streets and tunnels of Gaza.

Colonel (Ret.) Liam Collins and US Maj. (Ret.) John Spencer co-authored the book “[Understanding Urban Warfare.](https://www.amazon.com/Understanding-Urban-Warfare-Liam-Collins/dp/1912440350/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2ASB1OALUYXB9&keywords=Understanding+Urban+Warfare.&qid=1698142342&sprefix=understanding+urban+warfare.+%2Caps%2C72&sr=8-1)”

Collins is the executive director of the Madison Policy Forum, a senior fellow with New America and a US Army Special Forces officer. He served for 27 years with multiple deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Spencer is chair of urban warfare studies with the Modern War Institute at the US Military Academy at West Point. He served 25 years as an infantry soldier, including two combat tours in Iraq.

They provided a sobering assessment of Israel’s capabilities, saying they don’t think the Israeli military is prepared for the large-scale urban combat they will likely encounter in Gaza. This type of operation can take many months because an advanced military like the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) loses many of its advantages when fighting in a city.

The experts said Israel does retain some advantages, such as specially developed armored bulldozers that can be used in urban combat and the ability to fight at night, but that must be weighed against their lack of experience and training in urban combat. At the same time, Hamas has more than 200 hostages, human shields, suicide bombers, tunnels, booby traps, many civilians that remain trapped and has had years to dig in.

If the Israeli invasion goes ahead, they estimate that the IDF will destroy “80 to 90” percent of Gaza’s urban areas and the operation “will change the landscape of this area for decades.”

The biggest gap in the IDF is not their training areas or their tanks. It’s in a body of knowledge on how to do this big of an urban operation as fast and effectively as possible. To be clear, all militaries, to include the United States, are not trained, manned or equipped for this type of urban battle.

**LIAM COLLINS:**  I don’t think their military is prepared to conduct large-scale urban operations.  When you go to Israel and try to find their large urban training center, like many other militaries, they have something, but it’s not what you need to train for something like Gaza.

Israel has been extremely effective at antiterrorism operations in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the country, but that doesn’t translate to large-scale military operations in an urban environment.

**SPENCER:**  There are a lot of unknowns that will be encountered, both on Hamas capabilities — everything from surface-to-air missiles to what don’t we know about that Hamas has in preparation for a likely retaliation by Israel.

**BERGEN:** Let’s talk specifically about the obstacles the Israelis face in Gaza: Hostages, human shields, suicide bombers, tunnels, cross-border tunnels, improvised explosive devices and booby traps, and many civilians. There is also no element of surprise here.

For political reasons, given international pressures, the Israelis also may want to make this operation in Gaza as short as possible. On the other hand, for military purposes, this could go on for months, right?

**SPENCER:**  I say it would take months to do the mission in Gaza.

**BERGEN:**  What advantages does an advanced military like the IDF lose in a well-populated, dense urban space?

**SPENCER:**  They lose the ability to use advanced technologies to strike the enemy before you get close to them, which is what all militaries want to do. That’s why urban warfare is the most difficult, because all those superior advantages that a big military has are reduced and, in some respects, eliminated.

They lose the ability to do “combined arms maneuver.” The whole concept of combined arms maneuver from World War II to today is about having mobile forces that can maneuver around the enemy and envelop them. You’re not going to do that in an urban area. No military wants to funnel its forces into a single street or multiple single streets.

**COLLINS:**  To provide some tactical-level examples, there are so many opportunities for the enemy to hide and move without being observed by the intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, or drones up in the sky. They can’t see the enemy because they’re moving through tunnels. The enemy can move between buildings by blowing walls from one building to another. And then, in terms of the firepower, even if you see them, you can’t always shoot because there might be another building in the way, and then all the while, you have to be concerned about civilians in that area.

**there are so many opportunities for the enemy to hide and move without being observed by the intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, or drones up in the sky**

**SPENCER:  The other thing they lose is the effects of their weapons.  In the concrete jungle of urban warfare, most of your weapons may not even penetrate the building the enemy is in. Yes, there are many that do, but most of the standard-issue weapons don’t.**

**BERGEN:  Because?**

**COLLINS  I’ll give an example.  Back in 2002, we dropped two 500-pound bombs on a small compound in rural area of Afghanistan, and somehow this Taliban fighter lived through that and threw a grenade at us. These structures provide inherent defenses for the defender.  You look at the destruction of a building and think no one could have survived that, but people routinely do.**

**Hamas wants to buy as much time as possible. The longer the urban fighting lasts, the more that political pressure will build for Israel to stop the attack due to the collateral damage and civilian casualties that are an inherent part of urban war. Their goal isn’t to destroy the IDF.  They can’t.  It’s to buy time.**

**BERGEN:  The Israelis presumably retain some advantages?**

**SPENCER:** [**D9 Bulldozers**](https://www.militarytoday.com/engineering/caterpillar_d9.htm)**. Two-story remote-controlled bulldozers that can go forward and take the enemy’s advantage away. The advantage Hamas has is that it’s hidden in concrete buildings. Still, if you lead with an armored bulldozer that can take the first strike of anything — for instance, RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades) — that gives you the advantage to take away the concrete building protection that the enemy relies on. So that’s one of the low-tech solutions that the IDF built, a capability the US military doesn’t really have.**

**COLLINS:   The Israelis also retain night-fighting capability; doing the attacking at night is to their advantage because that does favor them more than the enemy.**

**BERGEN: How do you suss out what the tunnels look like if you don’t have overhead imagery?**

**SPENCER:  The overhead imagery won’t help you at the depth that some of these tunnels are at. You have to have specific underground mapping technologies.**

**BERGEN:  What about using robots, and what about using tear gas in tunnels?**

**SPENCER:  Tear gas is an effective way to clear a building of enemy personnel, without destroying it.  It is unlikely Israel will use it because of the political aspect of it; what does it look like when Israel is using gas?**

**BERGEN: You quote the Australian strategist David Kilcullen in your book: “Cities are sponges for troops.” Why?**

**SPENCER:  Because of that force power that you need to clear even a street. You’re not going to bomb your way to that. An urban defender of a much smaller size can soak up your entire military, but that isn’t to say that it’s not a mission that can be accomplished. It just requires a lot of force and power, including a lot of soldiers.**

**COLLINS:  And the other challenge with the urban environment, too is you could clear an area, but as soon as you leave that building, you can no longer assume it’s cleared because the enemy may circle back on you using tunnels or through the walls of other buildings. They may get behind you and then reoccupy a building or an area as soon as you leave it.**

**BERGEN:  Snipers are a tough problem. Presumably, Hamas has snipers who are going to be entrenched, and they know the terrain very well.**

**SPENCER: There are a lot of lessons learned from the last 20 years of urban battles, to include acoustic sensors that can tell you where a sniper is.**

**Also, if you’ve ever seen an IDF soldier, they have a very large bag that goes to the top of their head. It’s a special type of camouflage. The IDF** [**wears**](https://agilitegear.com/products/mitznefet-multicam) **on their heads these bags that cover their helmets to fool snipers**

**BERGEN:  What about robots on the Israeli side?**

**COLLINS:  They will, without a doubt, employ them, but they probably don’t have as many as they would like, and they’re slow.**

**BERGEN: Hamas provides garbage removal. It provides some social services. It was elected a government in 2006. There’s been no election since. But it functions on multiple levels. It has a terrorist component. Does that complicate things?**

**COLLINS: You have this hybrid organization that’s a terrorist organization and a paramilitary organization that provides government services.**

**So, Israel is not — despite stating that the goal is to “destroy” Hamas — they know that’s unrealistic. That’s just a political statement they have to say. Their goal is to degrade them and prevent a future attack. So, really, what they’re going after is the leadership, the terrorist wing, the fighting wing of Hamas.**

**So, they will call the end to the operation when they feel that they have culminated in terms of the diminishing point of returns on degrading additional capability versus the political cost of continuing that operation to degrade additional capability.**

**BERGEN:  What does the day after the fighting stops look like in Gaza?**

**COLLINS:   It’s people moving back to their houses. You’re removing rubble. You’re   trying to get services back up and running. Nongovernment organizations are coming in and trying to restore some semblance of normal life to the Palestinians.**

**BERGEN:**  The Israelis already pulled out of Gaza back in 2005 because it was too big of a headache, and the Israelis that I’ve spoken say, “We’re not going to hold Gaza,” but, if that’s the case, then who is?

**SPENCER:**  Militaries have an abysmal record at building states or nations or building cities in general. Who will govern Gaza?  Who is going to provide services and security and reconstruction? That’s a massive question.

**BERGEN:**  Let’s go to Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq that was taken by ISIS in 2014. In your book, you write about one hundred billion dollars’ worth of damage to the city during the fight to clear ISIS out of Mosul from late 2016 into 2017.

**SPENCER:** ISIS had two years of defensive planning and building a defense in depth with massive obstacle belts in Mosul, and that is why it took nine months for a hundred thousand security Iraqi forces — albeit nothing like the IDF — backed by the US with the world’s best air power to discriminately, building by building, destroy most of Mosul.

That’s a telling sign of what it would look like to accomplish the current mission we think the IDF will get. It will destroy 80 to 90% of the infrastructure and buildings in Gaza’s urban areas. This will change the landscape of this area for a generation.

**COLLINS:**  People should know that even under the most stringent laws of war, cities are destroyed in order to accomplish this type of mission.

**BERGEN:**  Israel seems like a tank-based army. Walk me through what tanks in an urban environment can do and the advantages and disadvantages they have.

**COLLINS:**   Tanks have a huge advantage in the open desert. But many of their advantages get neutralized or lessened when you enter the urban environment. Their ability to range targets from a distance is greatly reduced and they can’t elevate their main gun to engage targets in tall buildings. So, you need a tank as part of your combined arms team in urban combat, but it’s much more vulnerable there than it is elsewhere.

**Tanks have a huge advantage in the open desert. But many of their advantages get neutralized or lessened when you enter the urban environment**

**SPENCER:**  Of all the challenges inherent to this type of urban combat, the tank is extremely vulnerable.

But there is no other tool that is as vital as the tank when you fight in a city, because it can go down a street and take the punch of the defender. It has a firepower unique to ground forces that it can punch through concrete, and it has the mobility to move around.

The disadvantage, of course, is that it can’t see everything. It is vulnerable. It is slow. You can see it coming. So, it has to be protected with infantry.

**BERGEN:**  So, you’ve got to have substantial amounts of infantry protecting the tank?

**SPENCER:**  Right. That’s the lesson of the Ukraine war; Russia is an artillery tank-based army, so when it entered Ukraine in early 2022 they had reduced numbers of infantry and they lost an ungodly number of tanks.

**COLLINS:** You need the infantry to protect the tank, but you need the tank to protect the infantry.

**BERGEN:**  Doesn’t this have some implications for the “mass” involved when you launch a military operation in Gaza? Defending is easier than attacking?

**SPENCER:** We usually say this is the “combat power.” In an open terrain, you need three combat powers — some people just say troops — to one defender. In urban terrain, historically, you need fifteen or ten to one combat power because you can’t mass in urban areas.

One street can suck up an entire battalion just to try to move down that street.

**BERGEN:**  And a battalion would be 800 troops?

**SPENCER:**  Up to 900.

**BERGEN:**  Let’s just do some math here, what does it look like in terms of the size of the force that would need to be sent into Gaza?

**SPENCER:** There’s a lot of variables there, but it’s about power, not numbers. This isn’t the Battle of Berlin in 1945 where the Soviets put a battalion down every street. This is why urban battles also happen repeatedly, because nobody has a million-man army anymore. They have smaller armies, where a small opposing force can gain power in the urban environment, and you have to throw a lot of combat power — usually that’s artillery — to get them out.

**BERGEN:**  Let me ask you, Liam, about the hostages because you come from the US special operations community.

**COLLINS:**  I’m pretty confident that they don’t have the intelligence of where the hostages are located. They are most likely hiding them underground. And you absolutely need that kind of intelligence to conduct an operation, and then even if you have the intelligence, do you have the means to get there safely and get them out with a reasonable chance of success without losing the hostage and losing a significant portion of your force?

So, I think nations are probably staging their forces so that if they do get the intelligence, they can then decide if they’re going to try to rescue their citizens. But I think we’re most likely to see results through diplomatic means as was the case when Hamas released the American mother and her daughter last week.

Now, the Israeli hostages. I think those are the ones Hamas is going to hold on to the longest.

**SPENCER:**  To have this many hostages from this many countries intermixed with the enemy and the Israelis about to execute this operation is an unprecedented situation in my mind. 

**To have this many hostages from this many countries intermixed with the enemy and the Israelis about to execute this operation is an unprecedented situation.BERGEN:  Why did you write a book on urban warfare?**

**COLLINS: Battles are increasingly being fought in urban areas, and militaries worldwide, including our military in the US, are underprepared or unprepared to do it. I constantly challenge people to name a significant battle in Ukraine that’s not in one of the cities.**

**SPENCER:  Militaries are inherently resistant to urban warfare. It is a place where they don’t want to go. So, they don’t prepare for it, and that’s why the enemy continues to resort to it.**

**COLLINS: But you can’t help but be pulled into urban warfare because humans fight wars, and humans live in cities.**

The global economy is facing tremendous uncertainty from the [war between Hamas and Israel](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-10-10-23/h_a1afbdfe7c5ca766fbc967227164302e) in the Middle East, on top of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Those conflicts don’t just threaten the regions where they’re unfolding; they may also fray the weakening interconnectedness that remains among the world’s largest economies.

The [global economy](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/10/economy/imf-world-economic-outlook/index.html) has become more integrated over the past century. International supply chains have grown and technology has exponentially advanced, boosting the free flow of trade, capital and information globally.

That interconnectedness is known as globalization. It ramped up in the latter half of the 20th century following Germany’s reunification after WWII and grew even more as China became an international trade juggernaut.

However, since the 2008 global financial crisis many say those ties have begun to weaken. Seeking to stabilize their economies, many nations have begun to establish protectionist policies that attempt to shield their domestic industries from foreign competition, according to a recent analysis from Wells Fargo.

The dismantling of those economic ties is called deglobalization.

Some economists say that globalization has simply stalled, while others argue that it is reversing outright, with the Trump administration’s tariff war with China, the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as catalysts.

Wells Fargo economists have recently taken a bearish stance. According to them, the era of globalization has ended. On top of the rise in “harmful” trade restrictions, they point to a sharp decline in foreign direct investment flows around the world.

They say [Israel’s declaration of war against Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/08/middleeast/israel-gaza-attack-hostages-response-intl-hnk/index.html) could be yet another catalyst for deglobalization, though the extent of that is still up in the air.

Before the Bell spoke with Brendan McKenna, an international economist at Wells Fargo, on how the Israel-Gaza conflict could hasten deglobalization.

(This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.)

*Before the Bell: What role could the Israel-Gaza conflict play in deglobalization?*

*Brendan McKenna:* We did have geopolitical relations start to improve in the Middle East, but because of what’s going on in Israel and Gaza, it seems like we backtracked on a lot of that positive momentum.

And when you have this geopolitical fracturing, that just leads to reduced trade cooperation between countries, less information sharing, less technology sharing, and less financial-market linkages.

At the end of the day it is a deglobalization force.

*What will determine how much of an impact the conflict has on deglobalization?*

If the situation in the Middle East does escalate, that’s probably going to lead to a bigger fracturing in the Middle East and then possibly between some other major economic actors.

When you think about the United States, the country has very strong support of Israel, and if you see other countries such as China either take the other side or not explicitly support Israel, or choose to abstain, I think there’s a possibility that some of the trade linkages between the United States and those countries may sour.

*If deglobalization does get exacerbated, what would that mean for inflation and monetary policy, globally?*

With deglobalization, you get a global economic environment that’s less competitive, and when there’s less competition, that is ultimately inflationary, causing prices to rise.

If we do continue to get this economic fracturing led by geopolitics, that’s ultimately going to be something that’s inflationary, which can lead to higher interest rates, not just from the Fed, but also from other major central banks around the world.

And not only are you going to get pretty scary forces that would reduce global GDP growth and act as a restraint on global economic activity, but you can also get tighter monetary policy as a result which could kind of compound those effects as well.

*How could deglobalization potentially be a good thing?*

If there is another type of major economic shock, like from the pandemic, the US would not be reliant on China to provide raw materials. Production nearshoring can save a lot of time if there is a shock and can also save on a lot of costs.

Over the Covid era, China shut down production, disrupting the global supply chain, so deglobalization would bring some production back within US borders. It can also improve relations with Mexico and other countries.

Obviously, the US-Mexico relationship under the Trump administration was somewhat tense. If the US shows that it is committed to the trade relationship and building infrastructure and putting investment on the ground in Mexico, that can actually be something that could improve and enhance geopolitical relations between the US and Mexico.

So there’s not only a possible economic benefit, but there’s also maybe the political capital that can also be built up as a result of it.

**How Israel’s vital tech sector is navigating the war**

Israel’s vast tech sector has seen its fair share of crises, from financial downturns and the Covid-19 pandemic to periodic flare-ups in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, [my colleague Hanna Ziady reports](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/13/tech/israel-tech-sector-impact-hamas-war/index.html).

Each time, the industry has bounced back, demonstrating why the country of just 9 million people is known as the world’s “startup nation.”

But the war sparked by the Hamas assault last weekend that killed more than 1,300 people in Israel has upended daily life in a way that presents a unique challenge to the country’s most important industry.

Schools have been ordered to close, once-bustling streets in Tel Aviv, the center of business, have virtually emptied and many businesses remain shut. Some are closed for security reasons, but many simply cannot operate because their employees have been called up to military service.

“This is different than anything we’ve faced before,” said Avi Hasson, the CEO of Start-Up Nation Central (SNC), a non-profit that promotes Israel’s tech industry globally.

Henry Kissinger once [observed](https://www.henryakissinger.com/articles/the-next-steps-with-iran/) that Iranian leaders must decide if Iran is a cause or a nation.

Iran seems to have decided that it’s both, exporting its militant Shia ideology to countries across the Middle East from Lebanon in the north, arming the Houthis 1,500 miles to the south in Yemen, supporting Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, propping up the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

Hamas receives [funding](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/09/iran-support-hamas-training-weapons-israel/) for weapons from Iran, but [Hezbollah](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hezbollah#:~:text=Hezbollah%20wields%20significant%20power%20in,of%20Iran%2C%20its%20largest%20benefactor.) is more like [an arm](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/hezbollah-revolutionary-irans-most-successful-export/) of the Iranian government and has a much greater military capacity than Hamas. It has 150,000 rockets and is more militarily capable than the Lebanese army.

But neither Iran nor Hezbollah seems to have had a plan for what to do following Hamas’s massacres last month in Israel. It’s possible they had an inkling that Hamas was planning something without knowing the scale and ferocity of what the world saw on October 7.

Indeed, US intelligence sources say that senior Iranian officials [appeared surprised](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/politics/us-intelligence-iran-hamas-doubt/index.html) by Hamas’s attacks.

On Friday, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, spoke publicly for the first time about the war in Gaza. Nasrallah was at pains to say that Hamas’ October 7 attacks in Israel were “[100 percent](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4646326-nasrallah-says-al-aqsa-flood-operation-was-%E2%80%98100-percent%E2%80%99-palestinian)” a Palestinian operation, publicly discounting that Hezbollah and Iran had anything to with the operation, as some [reports](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-israel-hamas-strike-planning-bbe07b25) have suggested.

Nasrallah also [said](https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/11/03/all-options-are-open-for-lebanon-israel-front-hassan-nasrallah-says/) that “All options are on the table” when it came to Hezbollah’s [possible military response](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-03-23/h_159ef931dd83c8d040b0eaf4d7e8f64f) against Israel — the kind of threat that may not mean very much at all.

Nasrallah became a “[new icon](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/07/world/middleeast/07nasrallah.html)” across the Arab world during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war after Hezbollah abducted two Israeli soldiers, which triggered a [34-day war](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-war-cost/factbox-costs-of-war-and-recovery-in-lebanon-and-israel-idUSL0822571220070709) that ended in something of a stalemate. The conflict killed more than 1,100 Lebanese and 158 Israelis.

Hezbollah is a potent military force, but it is also a political movement. Following last year’s election in Lebanon, 58 out of 128 [seats](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/17/pro-hezbollah-bloc-loses-lebanese-parliamentary-majority) in the Lebanese parliament are in the pro-Hezbollah bloc, so Hezbollah must be somewhat responsive to Lebanese popular opinion. Given Lebanon’s ruined economy, the Lebanese people are unlikely to be eager for a repeat of the 2006 war, which caused billions of dollars of damage to their country.

**The Lebanese people are unlikely to be eager for a repeat of the 2006 war, which caused billions of dollars of damage to their country.Also, any decision by Hezbollah to widen the war would likely have to be cleared by Tehran, and right now, Tehran and its proxy forces in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen seem to want to keep up pressure on Israel and US forces in the region with harassing attacks, but not to instigate a wider warIran itself appears to be doing nothing visible to foment further conflict, while letting its proxies do the work for it. The Houthis, who control much of Yemen and are supported and supplied by Iran, have fired missiles, which** [**were intercepted**](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/politics/us-navy-intercept-missiles-yemen/index.html)**, at Israeli targets in recent days.  For the moment, both Hezbollah and Israel are exchanging tit-for-tat fire along Israel’s northern border that falls short of anything close to a full-blown war.**

**Meanwhile, in Iraq and Syria, US and partner military forces have** [**come under fire**](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/politics/drone-attack-base-syria/index.html) **from rockets and drones at least 28 times since October 17. Iranian proxies almost certainly launched those attacks. Twenty one US service members have been treated****for minor injuries, according to the Pentagon.**

**Iran’s ayatollahs may, at least rhetorically, seek the destruction of the state of Israel because the third holiest site in Islam, the Al Aqsa Mosque compound is in Jerusalem — which is also the holiest site in Judaism known as the Temple Mount. They also know that Israel is their most powerful military foe in the region.**

**But Iran is unlikely to instigate a full-scale regional war with Israel, which might well also draw in the United States, which has recently moved two** [**aircraft carrier groups**](https://news.usni.org/2023/10/24/u-s-carrier-moves-to-mediterranean-middle-east-aim-to-contain-conflict-says-pentagon-official) **to the Middle East.**

**Also, the leaders of Iran’s theocratic regime have faced a significant domestic protest movement over the past year largely led by women fed up with regulations requiring wearing the hijab in public, while they also have an economy that is hamstrung by significant** [**sanctions**](https://www.state.gov/iran-sanctions/) **imposed by the US and its allies. The Iranian** [**riyal**](https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/iran-rial-plunges-new-lows-amid-unrest-international-isolation-2023-02-26/) **has halved in value against the dollar since the protest movement began a little over a year ago, while the Iranian** [**inflation rate**](https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/inflation-cpi#:~:text=August%20of%202023.-,Inflation%20Rate%20in%20Iran%20decreased%20to%2039.50%20percent%20in%20September,macro%20models%20and%20analysts%20expectations) **is around 40 %.**

**The Iranians, in short, have enough problems of their own not to start a shooting war with Israel backed by its American ally. They prefer to act through their proxies in the region, keeping up some heat on Israel and the United States, but certainly not by dialing that heat up to 11.**

Divisions within the Israeli government are deepening after war cabinet minister [Gadi Eisenkot](https://cnn.com/2023/12/07/middleeast/israel-idf-war-cabinet-son-killed-gaza-intl/index.html) suggested the key [war aim of defeating Hamas](https://cnn.com/videos/world/2024/01/16/right-wing-visions-gaza-israel-karadsheh-pkg-vpx.cnn) is unrealistic and called for elections within months.

“Those who say that there was a major blow and demolition of the capabilities in the north of the strip are telling the truth,” Eisenkot told told Israeli broadcaster Channel 12 News on Thursday evening. “Those who talk about an absolute defeat and lack of will and ability do not tell the truth. This is why there is no need to tell tall tales.”

Eisenkot was speaking shortly after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu again said Israel’s military campaign would continue until it achieved “complete victory” over Hamas. His comments also come after Israel [withdrew some troops](https://cnn.com/2024/01/16/middleeast/israel-military-withdrawl-gaza-rift-intl/index.html) from northern Gaza and signaled a new phase of the conflict would begin soon.

But Eisenkot said: “A strategic achievement was not reached … We did not demolish the Hamas organization.”

The remarks are the latest symptom of rifts within Israel’s coalition government, as well as growing discontent with Netanyahu’s war plans. Established shortly after Hamas’ brutal October 7 attack, the Israeli war cabinet includes some ministers already at odds with one another.

**Calls for fresh elections**

In his interview, Eisenkot said Israel needed fresh elections because the public no longer has trust in Netanyahu’s leadership.

He also dismissed concerns over holding elections in the country while it’s at war. “Lack of trust among the public in its government is no less severe than lack of unity during a war,” he said.

“We need to go to the polls and have an election in the next few months, in order to renew the trust as currently there is no trust,” he said. “The state of Israel is a democracy and needs to ask itself, after such a serious event, how do we go forward with a leadership that is responsible for such an absolute failure?”

While the cabinet was created to show unity, it “does not disguise the fact that there are already major differences in policy and approach,” said Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) in Jerusalem, adding that these divisions are now surfacing.

Reuven Hazan, political scientist at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said that as the war passed the 100-day mark, divisions would inevitably emerge. “And they have,” Hazan told CNN, adding that “the lines between the two camps are getting worse and worse every day.”

Over three months into [Netanyahu’s war on Gaza](https://cnn.com/videos/world/2024/01/18/gaza-cemeteries-destroyed-diamond-lead-dnt-vpx.cnn), there is no end to the conflict in sight. Israel began its campaign after Hamas launched surprise cross-border attacks, killing 1,200 people and seizing more than [240 hostages](https://cnn.com/interactive/2023/12/world/hostage-israel-hamas-deal-dg/index.html). The Israeli authorities believe that more than 100 are stillalivein captivity, after 105 were released during a temporary truce in December. Dozens of hostages have been killed and their bodies remain in Gaza.

In the meantime, more than 24,000 people have been killed in Gaza, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in the enclave, andswathes of the territory have been flattened.

Hazan says the Israeli government has decided it has two goals in this war, which may not both be attainable. “One is to destroy Hamas, and the other is to return the hostages home,” he said, “And as we’ve seen, after over a hundred days, you cannot achieve both.”

Eisenkot said the government had failed to achieve what he says should be its highest priority: securing the release of the hostages.

“There’s no question for me what task is of highest priority,” he said. “There’s no dilemma: for me, the mission is to save civilians (hostages) before eliminating the enemy,” Eisenkot said, adding that there would be time later to eliminate Hamas.

A [poll](https://en.idi.org.il/articles/51616) by Israel Democracy Institute conducted in November found that while Israelis overwhelmingly support both defeating Hamas and retrieving hostages, they see the return of the hostages are more important.

**Tensions with US over Palestinian statehood**

Israel’s relations with its strongest ally, the US, have also been on a downward spiral. On Thursday the Israeli prime minister voiced a strong [rejection](https://cnn.com/2024/01/18/politics/netanyahu-biden-palestinian-state/index.html) of a post-war scenario that entails the creation of a Palestinian state, which the US and other countries have called for.

The idea of creating a Palestinian state would clash with the security of Israel, Netanyahu said. Netanyahu has made clear his opposition to a Palestinian state several times prior to his remarks on Thursday.

“In any arrangement in the foreseeable future, whether with or without an arrangement, the State of Israel must control the security of all the land, which is west of the Jordan River,” he told a press conference in Tel Aviv when asked about reports that he told US officials he opposes the idea of Palestinian sovereignty that would encompass both the West Bank and Gaza.

Netanyahu added that Israeli politicians asking for him to step down are essentially asking for the creation of a Palestinian state.

Hazan sees the relationship between Israel and US as likely to worsen, particularly, he said, because Netanyahu wants to cling to power.

Current and former Israeli politicians have asked Netanyahu to step down.

When asked if he thought Netanyahu had been prolonging the conflict to ensure his own political survival, Eisenkot said he did not believe that to be the case.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has also called for fresh elections. In an op-ed published in Haaretz on Thursday, he warned that Netanyahu’s current strategy risks alienating the US and leaving Israel “mired in the Gaza quagmire.”

**Netanyahu’s political survival**

Once the war comes to an end, the Israeli public’s focus may shift to Netanyahu’s pre-war shortcomings, some analysts say. More attention could fall on responsibility for the October 7 attack, as well as a new mandate for leadership, according to Plesner.

“Given Netanyahu’s situation in public opinion, I am not sure he is very keen on seeing this phase unfold,” he added.

The prime minister, who before the war was facing mass protests against his plans for a [judicial overhaul](https://cnn.com/2024/01/02/middleeast/israel-supreme-court-ruling-netanyahu-explained-intl/index.html), has so far refused to take any responsibility for the events of October 7. He has also allegedly refused to hold high-level discussions on plans for post-war Gaza, [Israeli media reported](https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-politicians-argue-the-future-of-gaza-netanyahu-is-in-no-hurry-to-release-a-plan/), leaving a handful of far-right members of the governing coalition to [fill the void with ideas](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/17/middleeast/israel-far-right-gaza-settler-movement-cmd-intl/index.html) viewed by many as extremist.

“(Netanyahu) understands that in order for him to stay in power, the war has to continue,” Hazan of the Hebrew University said, “Because the day the war ends, that’s when the people of Israel will turn against him.”

An opinion poll published earlier this month by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) found that only 15% of Israelis want Netanyahu to remain prime minister after the war. Twenty-three percent said they wanted former Defense Minister Benny Gantz as prime minister after the war.

Gantz is widely considered a likely successor to Netanyahu when an election is called.

“So, as horrible as this sounds, it is in the political and survival interests of Netanyahu to continue the war, and that will put him at odds with the Biden administration,” Hazan said.

Even if elections are held in Israel, Netanyahu will likely campaign against the prospect of a Palestinian state, telling those who support him that “only he can say no to the United States, and can say no to a Palestinian state,” Hazan said, adding that the prime minister likely believes this would turn public sentiments back in his favor.

Plesner, however, does not believe Netanyahu is trying to extend the war to remain in power. War decisions don’t come from Netanyahu alone, he said, noting that while Israelis want to see the hostages come home, there isn’t significant support for a permanent ceasefirethat may further empower Hamas.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday appeared to reject the idea of creating a Palestinian state, a statement that could contribute to [growing tensions](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/13/politics/biden-hostage-families-israel/index.html) between Washington and Jerusalem.

“In any future arrangement … Israel needs security control all territory west of Jordan. This clashes with the idea of (Palestinian) sovereignty. What can you do?” he told a news conference in Tel Aviv when asked about reports that he told American officials he opposes the idea of Palestinian sovereignty.

“This conflict is not about the absence of a (Palestinian) state but about the existence of a state, the Jewish state,” Netanyahu also said.

The apparent rejection of a Palestinian state is at direct odds with the stated position of one of Netanyahu’s staunchest allies, US President Joe Biden, who has long advocated for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even as Biden offers support for Israel, behind the scenes he and top officials have grown frustrated that Netanyahu appears to be rejecting advice and pressure on the campaign in Gaza.

American officials said Thursday they would not allow Netanyahu’s apparent rejection of an eventual Palestinian state to stop them from pressing the matter with their Israeli counterparts.

A senior administration official noted after Netanyahu’s comments that the prime minister had reversed himself on hardline positions before – and that his statement Thursday was not necessarily the final word.

“If we took such statements as the final word, there would be no humanitarian assistance going into Gaza and no hostages released,” a senior US administration official said. “As with those and many other issues, we will continue to work toward the right outcome, particularly on issues where we strongly disagree.”

One person familiar with the matter said it wasn’t clear whether Netanyahu had, in fact, relayed his views directly to American officials, as he stated during his news conference. The person said inside the administration, his comments aren’t being viewed as a major departure from what he’s said previously.

A public rift opened between Biden and Netanyahu last month over the mounting civilian casualties in Gaza and differences in opinion about what a future for Palestinians should look like after combat operations end. The US has been signaling that it wants Israel to move to [a lower intensity phase](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/07/europe/israel-hamas-gaza-new-phase-war-intl/index.html) of the war that focuses more on Hamas leaders and militants rather than the mass strikes that have led to tens of thousands of Palestinian civilian deaths.

“I want them to be focused on how to save civilian lives. Not stop going after Hamas, but be more careful,” Biden said [last month.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/14/politics/jake-sullivan-israel-trip/index.html)

Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Netanyahu in a meeting last week that “every partner that I met on this trip said that they’re ready to support a lasting solution that ends the long-running cycle of violence and ensures Israel’s security.” He said they are willing to help with reconstruction and a move to Palestinian governance in Gaza.

“But they underscored that this can only come through a regional approach that includes a pathway to a Palestinian state,” Blinken said.

“If Israel wants its Arab neighbors to make the tough decisions necessary to help ensures lasting security, Israeli leaders will have to make hard decisions themselves,” he said.

Both Biden and Netanyahu have faced increasing domestic political pressure as the military campaign in Gaza has dragged on. The US president [is confronted constantly by pro-Palestinian protesters](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/politics/joe-biden-protests-israel-hamas-war/index.html) who demand he call for a ceasefire and up the pressure on the Israelis to end their military campaign that began in the wake of the October 7 terror attack by Hamas.

Meanwhile Netanyahu faces pressure from Israelis over the fact that scores of hostages are still being held from Hamas’ attack and the security failures that allowed it to take place. Failure to deliver on the return of those hostages would intensify political pressure on a decisive leader whose popularity among Israelis has only plunged since October 7.

Amid calls for Netanyahu to resign, the prime minister claimed in the news conference that the Israeli politicians asking for him to step down are essentially asking for the creation of a Palestinian state.

“Those who talk about the day after Netanyahu are actually talking about the establishment of a Palestinian state,” he said, adding that an Israeli prime minister needs to be “capable of saying no to our friends,” he added.

When asked about Netanyahu’s remarks, John Kirby, the US National Security Council spokesman, told reporters aboard Air Force One on Thursday that “nothing has changed” in Biden’s desire for a Palestinian state.

“We’re not going to stop working towards that goal. And this is this is not a new comment by Prime Minister Netanyahu,”

Hamas has become the latest party to the Gaza [hostage and ceasefire negotiations](https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/10/politics/gaza-israel-hamas-ceasefire-biden-trump-backing/index.html) to voice optimism about the prospects of reaching a deal, amid a flurry of diplomatic activity in the region.

In an official statement on Tuesday, Hamas said reaching an agreement was “possible.” A Hamas source also added that the talks were “positive and optimistic.”

Top US, Israeli, Qatari and Egyptian officials have all touted progress in the negotiations in recent days. While officials caution that a deal is neither sealed nor guaranteed, the upbeat language and recent diplomatic activity point to significant momentum toward reaching a deal.

The CIA director, Bill Burns, is expected to travel to Qatar this week to participate in further talks on a ceasefire in Gaza, a US official and a second source familiar with the plans told CNN, with Burns expected in Doha as early as Wednesday, according to the second source.

An Israeli source familiar with the matter told CNN that a deal was still potentially weeks away.

Hamas also cautioned that hurdles remain, suggesting that Israel was “imposing new conditions” in the negotiations.

“The Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas affirms that in light of the serious and positive discussions taking place in Doha today, under the auspices of our Qatari and Egyptian brothers, reaching an agreement for a ceasefire and prisoner exchange is possible if the occupation stops imposing new conditions,” the organization said in a statement.

Both Israeli and Hamas teams are in the Qatari capital for indirect negotiations. The Israeli delegation includes representatives from the Mossad and Shin Bet security services, a source familiar with the matter told CNN. It is the most intensive period since talks [fell apart](https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/30/middleeast/gaza-ceasefire-lebanon-israel-analysis-intl/index.html) at the end of August.

The terms of the deal are broadly the same as the proposal put forth by US President Joe Biden earlier this year, according to a diplomatic source familiar with the matter.

The [three-phase Biden proposal](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/31/politics/biden-middle-east-remarks/index.html) in late May paired a release of hostages held in Gaza with a “full and complete ceasefire.” The first phase would last six weeks and include the “withdrawal of Israeli forces from all populated areas of Gaza” and the “release of a number of hostages, including women, the elderly, the wounded in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners,” the US president had said.

“What has changed is that Israeli forces are likely to stay in Gaza temporarily,” when phase one of a deal starts, the diplomatic source said, namely in the strip of land on the Gaza-Egypt border, called the Philadelphi corridor, and in an area bisecting the strip, known as the Netzarim corridor.

Israel’s demand that its troops remain along the Philadelphi corridor – and Hamas’ insistence that they withdraw – was a key reason for the collapse of talks in August.

A US official told CNN that the Doha meetings were at the lower “working” level. “US officials believe that a deal is closer than it has been but caution that there are gaps and sticking points that remain between Israel and Hamas,” the official said.

The optimistic language follows a slew of regional diplomatic activity, including a visit by US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to Israel, Egypt and Qatar last week.

“My goal will be to put us in a position to be able to close this deal this month,” Sullivan said last week, speaking after his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Brett McGurk, a top Middle East adviser to President Biden, remained in Doha with other US officials working toward a ceasefire in Gaza as US officials believe that a deal is closer than it has been.

McGurk had been traveling in the region with Sullivan and the fact that he stayed is a sign the administration feels positive momentum, but a deal is not expected imminently.

US and Israeli officials have said conditions have ripened for an agreement to be reached in the wake of the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, which has further isolated Hamas in its battle against Israel.

Officials also point to the killing of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and other Israeli military achievements as giving the Israeli government the victories it has sought to achieve before reaching a ceasefire deal.

Since the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, the death toll from Israeli military action in Gaza has risen to almost 45,000, with more than 106,000 people injured, according to the health ministry in the territory.

US President-elect Donald Trump has also impacted talks, nudging Netanyahu toward a deal and threatening that there would be “all hell to pay” if the hostages were not released by the time he took office. His incoming team has also coordinated closely with the Biden administration and made trips to the region to help secure a deal.

US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Tuesday there is “cautious optimism tempered by realism” about the possibility of finally achieving a truce in Gaza.

“Based on the remaining issues, we should be able to get to an agreement, we should be able to bridge the disagreements between the two parties,” Miller said, without going into detail about the remaining issues.

“But that is not to say that that we will, because again, there have been times before where we were close and we thought the differences were bridgeable, and ultimately we didn’t get a deal,” he said at a press briefing Tuesday. “As you’ve heard me say before, all the United States can do is push and try to come up with compromises, but we cannot dictate to either side what choice they have to make. They have to make those decisions for themselves.”

The longtime Israeli hostage negotiator Gershon Baskin cautioned that “there is no deal until there is a deal.”

“Hamas has been ready since September for a comprehensive deal to end the war, return all the hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, and even agreed to give up control in Gaza,” said Baskin, who is not directly involved in the talks but remains a keen analyst. “What is brewing now, perhaps, is a major Egyptian-Qatari effort to reach a deal in stages.”

“Public anger against Hamas is erupting throughout Gaza,” he said. “At the same time, Hamas will not agree to release all the hostages if the IDF remains in Gaza, and even if there is a temporary ceasefire, it will not last if Israel intends to prevent the free movement of a million Gazans who want to return to their homes that no longer exist.”

The Israeli prime minister has also vowed that he will not end the war until Hamas is completely defeated in Gaza, raising the prospect of the war resuming once a number of hostages are released in the first phase of the agreement.

**Amid the optimism, more destruction**

Renewed optimism over the talks comes even as Israeli forces continue to pound northern Gaza in an offensive Israel says is targeting Hamas’ renewed presence in the area.

Israeli attacks killed at least a dozen people in Gaza overnight, health officials in the enclave said on Wednesday.

Ten people were killed and a number of others wounded in Israeli strikes on a home near Kamal Adwan hospital in northern Gaza, according to the Gaza health ministry. The area has been hit repeatedly in the past week.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said a strike there on Tuesday had targeted Hamas militants who were planning to attack Israeli forces. Islam Ahmad, an eyewitness who was inside the hospital at the time told CNN the strike hit a residential building housing displaced families.

The destruction around Kamal Adwan has restricted the flow of medical supplies to what is one of only three hospitals still operational in northern Gaza.

The hospital has been “bombarded relentlessly” in recent days, according to its director Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya. Attacks on its generators have left it without electricity, its water tank has been destroyed and staff in its intensive care unit – the last functioning one in the area, according to Safiya – have been shot at.

“Anyone who moves in the hospital risks being injured or killed. As of now, there is no electricity, water, or oxygen at all,” he said Tuesday, adding, “It is clear that the whole world either does not see or does not want to see what is happening.”

Of the three minimally operational hospitals left in northern Gaza, Kamal Adwan is the closest to Israeli military activity in Beit Lahiya and the Jabalya Refugee Camp and has been receiving most of the injured from the surrounding fighting.

On Monday, the World Health Organization’s director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said WHO staff had finally reached the hospital two days earlier after four previous missions were denied access, leaving the hospital without specialized personnel for surgical and maternal care.

The WHO chief said the ongoing hostilities around the hospital had “further damaged the oxygen supply, generators, and broken windows and doors of the patients’ rooms.”

“The conditions in the hospital are simply appalling,

The Biden administration is racing against the clock as it attempts to secure a ceasefire in the [Israel-Hamas war](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) before Ramadan next month, with senior US officials believing that the release of Israeli hostages from Gaza is the only plausible way to bring the first pause to the deadly conflict since a seven-day truce in late November – and possibly, an eventual end to the war.

Looming over the hostage deal discussions is the threat by Israel to [launch an offensive into Rafah](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/middleeast/israel-rafah-ramadan-gantz-intl/index.html) in southern Gaza, where around 1.5 million displaced Gazans have fled. US officials have pointedly warned Israel against pushing farther south without guaranteeing the safety of those civilians – a seemingly impossible task.

“If there’s an operation against Rafah, we can forget about a deal happening,” said a diplomat familiar with the negotiations between Israel and Hamas being mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States.

With the Muslim holy month of Ramadan beginning on March 10, the next two weeks of negotiations are “pivotal,” a source familiar with the ongoing efforts told CNN. An aggressive military push by Israel during Ramadan would only further inflame tensions across the region.

What is less clear to some officials involved in the discussions is to what extent Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would prefer a pause in the fighting over an offensive in Rafah that would continue his goal of trying to dismantle Hamas.

“It doesn’t look like Netanyahu is willing to do any deal at the moment,” the diplomat said.

The stakes of the moment could hardly be higher given that a successful deal could usher in a new and potentially final phase of a war that is now fully in its fifth month. The pause and hostage talks, sources say, have been difficult despite some progress being made in recent weeks – and far more complicated than the first round of negotiations.

Several of President Joe Biden’s top national security officials have been traveling in and out of the Middle East in quick succession in recent weeks, pushing Israel and Hamas to come to an agreement that would launch an initial six-week pause in fighting and the eventual release of the more than 100 remaining hostages.

White House Middle East Coordinator Brett McGurk was back in Cairo on Wednesday before going to Israel on Thursday to continue these efforts; his trip comes on the heels of CIA Director Bill Burns’ visit to the region last week which included stops in Doha, Israel and Cairo.

Burns is expected to travel to Paris on Friday for further talks with Israeli, Qatari and Egyptian officials, according to two sources familiar with the plans.

**Netanyahu called Hamas proposals ‘delusional’**

Hamas leaders have also been in Cairo this week meeting with Egyptian officials to try to move the deal forward after Netanyahu dismissed the most recent series of Hamas proposals as “delusional.”

The frameworks have included a series of multi-phase pauses that would amount to at least a four-and-a-half-month ceasefire while hostages and Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons are released. Among the biggest sticking points, people familiar with the talks say, were Hamas’ demands for the release of some 1,500 prisoners in the first phase, Israeli troops leave Gaza and discussions that would lead to a formal end to the war.

In the follow-up meetings in Cairo last week with intelligence chiefs from Israel, the US, Egypt and the Qatari prime minister, the Israeli delegation was only willing to discuss the humanitarian aid aspects of a deal, not the other components, the diplomat familiar with the discussions said. Israel did not send a technical team with their delegation, evidence that they didn’t truly intend to negotiate, the diplomat said.

Israel then added another condition: proof that medicine that had been sent to Gaza for the hostages had actually reached them.

“This is very important because it will show us that there is someone there [in Gaza] that can really deliver and release our hostages,” Gal Hirsch, the Israeli government’s hostage coordinator, told CNN on Saturday at the Munich Security Conference.

In response, on Tuesday, Dr. Majed Al-Ansari, the spokesperson for the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Qatar has confirmation from Hamas that it has received a shipment of medicine for Israeli hostages in the Gaza Strip.

“Qatar received these confirmations as the mediator in the agreement,” Al-Ansari said in a written statement.

**Israel appears dug in**

As Israel appears dug in its position, negotiators expect Hamas to again respond in the coming days. But given the gaps that remain, a final agreement still does not appear imminent.

US and United Nations officials, along with international aid agencies, have been warning of catastrophe if Israel pushes into Rafah where Palestinians have desperately sought shelter and distance from the worst of the fighting. Israeli warplanes have already been bombing Rafah, with more than 100 people [killed](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/12/middleeast/israel-airstrikes-rafah-ground-offensive-looms-intl-hnk/index.html) in one set of strikes last week.

In a draft of a US resolution circulated at the UN on Monday, American officials wrote that “such a major ground offensive should not proceed under current circumstances.”

But Israeli officials continue to warn of the pending operation.

“The world must know, and Hamas leaders must know — if by Ramadan our hostages are not home, the fighting will continue to the Rafah area,” Israeli war cabinet minister Benny Gantz warned over the weekend.

The first hostage deal in late November saw the return of dozens of hostages taken captive by Hamas on October 7 and a week-long truce. Since the end of that truce, already three months ago, civilian casualty levels in Gaza has continued to soar, as has the global condemnation of Israel’s military operation and the political pressure on the Biden administration to call for a permanent end to the war.

Senior US officials believe that there is no chance of Israel getting to the point where it would agree to a permanent ceasefire in the war without the release of hostages, sources say. Only during a pause in fighting, even if considered temporary, discussions could continue that would eventually end the war, they argue.

Israeli officials, including Netanyahu, have continued to argue that “complete victory” is needed over Hamas. For the most part, the US continues to stand by Israel, albeit with a bit more distance as administration officials have grown increasingly critical of Israel’s military operations in the strip. Biden himself recently described Israel’s conduct as “over the top” and the bombing “indiscriminate.”

The United States yet again vetoed a United Nations Security Council draft resolution on Tuesday calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Instead, the US started circulating its own resolution calling for a “temporary ceasefire,” the first time the US used the word “ceasefire” at the United Nations. But it was a few days after Biden himself started using it, a notable shift given how loaded the term has become.

Supporting Tuesday’s UN resolution, proposed by Algeria, in the middle of the ongoing hostage talks would have jeopardized the ceasefire talks, White House said.

“I think the American people, and I think most of the people around the world, would love to see those hostages home with their families,” White House spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday. “And if we just voted – went along with this resolution – the chances of doing that would be greatly reduced.”

Israel has called the latest set of demands from Hamas “ridiculous” and “absurd” but said it will send a negotiating team to Qatar in the coming days to continue negotiations on a ceasefire in the [war in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) and release of hostages held by the terror group.

Hamas submitted a new set of demands on Thursday, including calls for a large number of Palestinian prisoners to be released and an eventual agreement on a permanent ceasefire.

The response from Hamas was long-awaited after discussions over a proposed six-week pause in the fighting appeared to stall. The Biden administration has repeatedly said in recent weeks that the onus was on Hamas to respond and that Israel had generally agreed to a framework deal.

Hamas communicated their latest proposal via mediators Qatar and Egypt on Thursday, two sources familiar with the negotiations told CNN. On Friday, the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that “Hamas is continuing to hold to unrealistic demands” but announced that an Israeli team would soon be traveling to Doha to further talks.

An agreement, if it happens, is expected to have multiple phases**,** and in the first stage**,** Hamas has proposed releasing the Israeli hostages who are women – including IDF soldiers – the elderly, sick and wounded. That number is believed to be around 40 out of the around 100 hostages who remain alive.

The latest proposal by Hamas demands that some 700 to 1,000 Palestinians prisoners be released, a diplomat familiar with the discussions told CNN, confirming [earlier reporting](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-issues-ceasefire-proposal-mediators-which-includes-exchanging-2024-03-15/) by Reuters.

In a second phase, Hamas said that each side should release all remaining hostages and prisoners, which would include male IDF soldiers and more Palestinian prisoners. The Hamas proposal included 100 prisoners serving life sentences in Israeli prisons, the diplomat said.

But the toughest sticking points may be the Hamas demands that after the initial exchange of hostages and prisoners, Israel agree to a permanent ceasefire and a withdrawal of the Israeli military from Gaza. Israel’s government has repeatedly said those terms are unacceptable and that they still intend to continue the fight against Hamas until “complete victory.”

Israel’s leaders have also vowed to carry out a ground offensive in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where almost 1.5 million Palestinians have sought refuge.

The diplomat familiar with the discussions said: “It is not going to be easy to convince Israelis of this [Hamas proposal].”

**‘Tough negotiations are expected’**

An Israeli official echoed the sentiment to CNN, predicting that “very tough negotiations are expected,” but said negotiators are going to Doha because Hamas finally delivered a response.

The team is expected to leave Israel at the beginning of next week, a second Israeli official said, and a decision will be made by the end of Saturday on the scope of what the Israeli negotiating team is allowed to agree to. Even if both Hamas and Israel are participating in the talks, the two sides would not be in the same room.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Friday that the fact that Israel has sent a team to pursue the negotiations “reflects the sense both of possibility and of urgency to get an agreement, to get a ceasefire, to get the hostages back, to get even more humanitarian assistance in.”

“What I can tell you is we’re working intensively with Israel, with Qatar, with Egypt, to bridge the remaining gaps and to try to reach an agreement,” Blinken said.

CIA Director Bill Burns has been the Biden administration’s point person on ceasefire discussions and recently returned from a trip to Egypt, Qatar and Jordan, where he also met with Israeli Mossad director David Barnea.

The Biden administration is not planning on sending a team to Qatar for the next round of discussions, but on Friday, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said that Hamas’ response is “within the bounds of the deal that we’ve been working on now for several months. I don’t want to go into more detail than that,” he said, suggesting that the delegation heading to Doha for talks is a positive sign but that any ultimate agreement could change following negotiations.

“The fact that we’re physically not going to have a delegation there should not be taken as any kind of signal that this isn’t a serious, positive move forward. We think it could be,” Kirby told CNN’s MJ Lee at a White House press briefing.

The Biden administration has increasingly called for an “immediate ceasefire” of at least six weeks. They had set the beginning of Ramadan, earlier this week, as a goal for it to begin and expressed optimism that was possible. But the start of the Muslim holy month came and went without an agreement.

In an Oval Office meeting on Friday, Ireland’s prime minister called for a ceasefire “as soon as possible,” which Biden nodded to and said he agreed.

A senior Hamas official noted the White House’s characterization of their response, saying it “confirm[s] the seriousness of the [Hamas] movement in reaching an agreement for a ceasefire.”

“We will not accept anything less than an end to the aggression on Gaza, the return of the displaced, the withdrawal of the occupation, and the entry of humanitarian aid,

We arrive at Erez Checkpoint. Israeli soldiers thumb through our passports, examine every item in our bags, then wave us through. After a long walk through a barricaded no-man’s land, Palestinian officers register our names and passport numbers, then press us for a list of people we’re planning to meet. Our Palestinian fixer intervenes, reminds the guys with the guns to be nice to us foreigners, and presto: We’re in Gaza. On the list of the three or four people we’re scheduled to see in the course of the day is at least one senior official in Hamas.

This is a routine I participated in, on and off, for 16 years of my life while reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the American media throughout the 1990s and 2000s, up until [my last trip to Gaza](https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0129/p07s01-wome.html) in January 2009 at the end of another Israel-Hamas war that shocked the world and caused needless death and destruction. Later, in 2014, I covered a far deadlier 50-day Israel-Hamas war for [TIME magazine](https://time.com/3009796/israel-gaza-invasion-casualties/), this time from southern Israel, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, mainly because by then I had two toddlers at home and no longer believed entering Gaza was worth the risk.

In nearly every trip I made — and there were too many to count — I met with Hamas officials, like seemingly every good journalist did. Like many others, I was curious to hear their viewpoint and, back when peacemaking was a thing and [Israel was turning territory over to the Palestinian Authority](https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/12/world/israelis-leave-biggest-town-in-west-bank.html), I was keen to understand why they wouldn’t get on board with the land-for-peace deal known as the Oslo Accords.

The Oslo process for dividing the land with Israel to create a zone of Palestinian autonomy — and possibly statehood — had been embraced, at least tepidly, by the late Yasser Arafat, head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). But Hamas, the PLO’s most significant Palestinian rival, was fundamentally opposed to peace with Israel, insisting the only path forward was “[armed resistance](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/doctrine-hamas)” aimed at eradicating Israel. Throughout the 1990s, when the peace process was moving forward, Hamas sought to derail it by blowing up Israeli buses and cafes. By the early 2000s, when peacemaking ground to a halt, they had [killed hundreds of Israeli civilians](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/major-palestinian-terror-attacks-since-oslo) in this manner, leading to further separation of Israeli and Palestinian societies.

The Hamas leaders and spokesmen who agreed to our interviews were rarely what you would expect of representatives of a terrorist organization. They were men who were [fluent in English](https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1206282283), logical-sounding about their grievances and highly educated to boot, usually in engineering or medicine. They portrayed themselves as part of a “political wing” of Hamas, one that was unaware of what was being planned by the more secretive military wing. Often, these spokesman insisted, they had no idea that an attack was imminent.

By and large, we reporters ate it up. Our editors wanted us to have access to this shadowy group and to explain its lure for average Palestinians — and in particular, the strategic challenge it presented to Arafat. By claiming that the organization’s left hand didn’t know what the right hand was doing, Hamas made it easy for themselves to evade tough questions — like, why target civilians rather than military targets? — and convenient for so many of us to feel like we were putting our fingers on the Palestinian pulse rather than sitting down for tea with terrorists.

So we sipped their bitter brews, and they talked a good game. “Look, we take no joy in seeing Israeli civilians get blown up,” one spokesman told me — back in the day when Hamas’ worst weapon was a suicide bomber in an urban area — before going on to insist that these attacks were the only rational answer to what they saw as the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. When I asked why Hamas wouldn’t take a crack at negotiations instead, they responded that there was no point in talking to Israel — and Israel wasn’t exactly jumping to talk to Hamas either. The spokesman insisted I not use his name with that almost-empathetic quote about not taking joy in killing Israelis. In retrospect, I wonder if he said it because he knew it sounded good to the Western ear.

Hamas played other games with language, presenting themselves as reasonable by saying that its leaders would in theory agree to a long-term [hudna](https://www.prio.org/publications/7356), or truce, with Israel. Their words sound nice — who wouldn’t chose a lasting truce over the horrific killing and destruction we are now witnessing? — but the reality was that Hamas would never ink a permanent deal with Israel because, their leaders told me, Islam forbade it.

And then there were the outright distortions. Ahead of October 7, [Hamas duped Israel](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-israel-was-duped-hamas-planned-devastating-assault-2023-10-08/) into thinking that the organization was uninterested in inflaming the situation and wanted Gazans’ lives to improve. With that in mind, Israel actually [relaxed the Gaza border crossings](https://apnews.com/article/israel-gaza-crossing-protest-violence-palestinian-erez-8d1d3cd570f27e6470f23daef4337216) in late September — a week before the attack — to let more Palestinian laborers into Israel. Sadly, the opening to [thousands of additional workers from Gaza](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-reopens-gaza-crossings-lets-palestinians-back-work-after-two-weeks-2023-09-28/) turned Israel into an information sieve from which [Hamas reportedly gathered intelligence](https://www.ft.com/content/f1ec2502-8220-491c-95e0-5f1504ce9554) for its attack in October

Hamas also played fast and loose with facts they gave us reporters. During the first major Israel-Hamas war in 2008 to2009, known as Operation Cast Lead, Hamas said that fewer than 50 of the 1,400 dead in Gaza had been combatants. But more than a year later, Hamas’ interior minister acknowledged in an interview with the London-based Al-Hayat newspaper that [between 600 and 700 of its militants](https://www.haaretz.com/2010-11-09/ty-article/hamas-admits-600-700-of-its-men-were-killed-in-cast-lead/0000017f-ee02-ddba-a37f-ee6edc3f0000?lts=1699814113547) were killed in that war. In that and inalmost every war since, Hamas or other militant groups in Gaza launched rockets that fell unintentionally on their own citizens, [but rarely if ever](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3416), owned up to the error, instead blaming Israel for the deaths.

Yet how often did that stop us from reporting what they told us? That dynamic was on display last month when many mainstream media outlets immediately repeated Hamas’ claim that an Israeli air strike had devastated a hospital and killed a big round figure of 500 Palestinians. More details later emerged, indicating that it was [most likely Islamic Jihad](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/world/middleeast/gaza-hospital-israel-hamas-explained.html), a Hamas rival organization, that had fired an errant missile that landed on the site, and that the casualty count was much lower.

Hospitals once again took center stage in the war when Israel surrounded the Al-Shifa Hospital after claiming that Hamas had operated out of it. Hamas has long denied using hospitals [despite proof that they do](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/07/31/why-hamas-stores-its-weapons-inside-hospitals-mosques-and-schools/), and did the same this time even though there is evidence that [weapons were found on site](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/14/politics/white-house-hamas-al-shifa/index.html) and [tunnels have been built](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/middleeast/gaza-tunnel-shaft-al-shifa-hospital-intl-hnk/index.html) to allow the organization to use Al-Shifa as a base.

Reporters can feel they have little choice but to rely on Hamas’ numbers and denials because there are few reporters left in Gaza and few options to verify anything independently. But many journalists could be more transparent about how they don’t have independent verification and provide context on how unreliable Hamas has proved to be in the past.

One thing already clear after October 7 is that members of Hamas didn’t sound like they experienced “no joy” in the slaughter of more than 1,200 Israelis and the kidnap of [more than 200](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-notifies-relatives-of-199-people-that-their-loved-ones-are-gaza-hostages/). Hamas gunmen [laughed](https://twitter.com/kaitlancollins/status/1712292636407583221?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1712292636407583221%7Ctwgr%5Ea3915356404c4699a8fcf0b19a1bdd6dbe4816bd%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thedailybeast.com%2Fisrael-festival-survivor-says-hamas-gunmen-were-laughing-during-rampage) as they committed the attacks, according to eyewitnesses, and they recorded themselves as they [gleefully rampaged](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/18/hamas-video-israel-attack-pkg-chance-vpx.cnn) through Israeli homes.

Did Hamas change? Or was too much of the media too willing to see them as something other than what they always were?

It’s probably a bit of both. Although founded in 1987 as an [expressly Palestinian organization](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-reopens-gaza-crossings-lets-palestinians-back-work-after-two-weeks-2023-09-28/), there is evidence that [Hamas has been influenced](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/01/14/isis-in-gaza/?lp_txn_id=1504074) by the style and brutality of global jihadist groups in general, and ISIS in particular. Still, Hamas’ focus has remained on “the Zionist entity,” not the US, other Western targets or other religions per se. And to the extent there was once a political wing that might have had different aspirations, October 7 left no doubt that the military wing is now the center of [Hamas power and strategy](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/28/hamas-gaza-qatar-leaders-negotiations-hostages-ceasefire-war-israel/).

It’s not as if most of us in the media portrayed Hamas as innocent or moderate. But for years, too many of us treated the group more like an opposition party with occasional violent outbursts than a terrorist organization. In fact, while interning at Reuters at the start of my career in the mid-’90s, I learned that we were never to call Hamas or Islamic Jihad terrorists, only militants. Several [outlets](https://www.cbc.ca/news/editorsblog/editor-in-chief-note-use-of-words-terrorist-terrorism-1.6997281#:~:text=We%20bear%20witness.,being%20impediments%20to%20our%20journalism.) [maintain](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67083432) that [policy](https://www.voanews.com/a/why-news-outlets-are-avoiding-terrorist-labels-in-israel-hamas-war-/7344135.html) even amidst [the October 7 massacre](https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/MASSACRES/zgporzedjvd/), which clearly [meets the definition](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/terrorism) of terror as a deadly attack on civilians for ideological ends.

Journalists working in conflict zones too often pull punches in the interest of appearing neutral, or perhaps to ensure that they stay in the good graces of the gunmen in charge. Many of the questions that now reverberate in my head have no easy answers, but I can say that the ultimate goal for too many of us in the media was to ensure continued access to the big story, not to consider whether the people we were dealing with were good actors or reliable sources. Though it’s important for readers and viewers to hear Palestinian voices as well as those of Israelis, treating Hamas like a legitimate government was perhaps the worst of [bothsidesism](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/07/13/u-s-journalists-differ-from-the-public-in-their-views-of-bothsidesism-in-journalism/).

In 2014, a German journalist [was heavily criticized for embedding himself](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/12/23/the-strange-story-of-the-first-westerner-to-report-from-the-islamic-state/) with ISIS for a documentary. Trying to explain such a despicable group of murderers went beyond the pale, critics said. Weren’t there some actors whose behavior was so heinous that they didn’t deserve a platform or even so much as a quote, which might only afford them a measure of legitimacy?

Is this the approach we should have taken with Hamas, or ought to moving forward? In an ideal world, yes, but in this dystopian one we’re watching unfold, that may be too much to expect. In the meantime, if journalists continue to interview members of Hamas, we should report their words more critically and not take their comments at face value. We should provide context that notes how unverifiable their information is and how poor their track record for accuracy has been. And we should not shy away from asking ourselves whether our interviews afford them too much legitimacy and give them more of a platform than they deserve.

It was the night before Christmas in 1914 when British soldiers fighting along the Western Front heard holiday carols coming from the German trenches.

“The following day, British and German soldiers met in no man’s land and exchanged gifts, took photographs and some played impromptu games of football,” according to the UK’s [Imperial War Museum](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-real-story-of-the-christmas-truce). “They also buried casualties and repaired trenches and dugouts.” The truce lasted for only a few days — at most, a little past the start of the new year. And then it was back to war — a conflict in which some 8.5 million soldiers from all sides would ultimately die.

The timing of the Israel-Hamas truce that took effect Friday had nothing to do with a holiday. And the agreement to pause fighting for four days and exchange hostages and prisoners was negotiated over several weeks with the help of Egypt, Qatar and the US, rather than an impromptu occurrence. Hostages released by Hamas and prisoners freed by Israel joyously hugged their fathers, mothers and siblings, seven weeks after the terror attack on October 7 prompted the war.

By striking the deal, the two sides stirred hope for an eventual end to the bloodshed: the ceasefire can be extended if Hamas frees more of the people it is holding. But there is also the possibility that this truce won’t last much longer than the one in 1914.

“The deal arguably strengthens Hamas, allowing it to claim credit, catch its breath and regroup,” wrote **Frida Ghitis**. “Whatever Palestinians feel toward the organization that unleashed this round of fighting — and we will not hear many in Gaza now openly criticize Hamas — there’s little question that as long as this group remains in power, the future looks bleak for Gazans.”

“For Israel this deal is bitingly bittersweet. Negotiating with a terrorist organization that has just slaughtered and brutalized more than 1,000 of the country’s citizens and remains committed to Israel’s destruction —repeatedly confirming that goal — is not only hard to swallow, [it’s a moral and strategic dilemma of the highest order.”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/22/opinions/israel-hamas-hostage-deal-ghitis/index.html)

**Two clocks**

**Aaron David Miller**, a former Middle East negotiator who served in both Democratic and Republican administrations, observed, *“*[There is little doubt that Israel and the US are operating according to two very different timetables.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/opinions/israel-gaza-hamas-biden-netanyahu-miller/index.html) And these two clocks appear increasingly out of sync. Israel — committed to the destruction of Hamas’ military capacity and the end of its ability to governin Gaza— appears to be in no hurry to declare mission accomplished…”

“It’s apparent that the US clock is ticking much faster, a direct result of growing pressure from its European allies, key Arab partners and a deeply divided Democratic Party … Even within the Department of State and among congressional staff, there has been opposition to the administration’s passivity in the face of Palestinian loss of life that’s unprecedented in recent decades. Indeed, (President Joe) Biden himself almost certainly has come to understand that, as greatly as he’s concerned about Israel, the devastation and death in Gaza demands attention for Palestinians, too.”

Biden’s “democracy vs. autocracy” foreign policy is a mistake that weakens the US while failing to promote global stability, argued **Christopher McCallion**, a fellow at the Defense Priorities think tank.

“[America currently finds itself embroiled in three major geopolitical crises](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/22/opinions/biden-israel-gaza-ukraine-china-mccallion/index.html) … US forces are still on hand in the Middle East to deter Iran and Hezbollah from intervening against Israel in its war with Hamas, putting American troops at risk and threatening to pull the US into another major war in the region. American troops have already been targeted by dozens of drone and missile attacks from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and have conducted retaliatory strikes in response. In Eastern Europe, the US is essentially engaged in a proxy war with Russia over the latter’s invasion of Ukraine. In East Asia, the US risks a catastrophic showdown with China over the political status of Taiwan.”

**Sheryl Sandberg** wrote of the worldwide impact of the Israel-Hamas war. “People across the globe are protesting on all sides and shouting in the streets. But for one moment, I urge us to shift our focus from politics to humanity. … there is one opinion that everyone can agree on: Rape should never be used as an act of war.”

“On October 7, Hamas terrorists committed unspeakable atrocities that we must speak about — and speak about loudly. Numerous witnesses have testified that sexual violence was widespread on that day, according to reports by Israeli investigators….

“We have come so far in believing survivors of rape and assault in so many situations, yet this time, many are ignoring the stories that these bodies tell us about how these women spent the last moments of their lives.”

[“The silence on these war crimes is deafening.”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/opinions/sheryl-sandberg-something-we-can-all-agree-on)

**Amy Klein**: [Taking a trip to the firing range was something I’d never do before October 7](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/22/opinions/october-7-antisemitism-gun-ownership-klein)

An explosive roar shakes my home and my laptop goes flying, landing amid shattered glass and debris. Looking at its flickering screen, I sigh and brace myself to pronounce the death of another computer — and this essay. I collect it gently from the floor and coax it back to life. I keep writing.In Gaza, we have all been [glued to the news](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-10-10-23/index.html) for the last five days, watching in disbelief as strikes and counterstrikes have been exchanged and the death counts on both sides of the border mount. While every round of violence starts differently, they all end the same way here: with [Palestinians paying a heavy price](https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/16/middleeast/israel-palestinian-conflict-intl/index.html). We live in perpetual anticipation of a tragic ending.

Now I write, because writing is a lifeline, and a temporary escape from a reality that has become unfathomably darker in the last few days.

Our electricity falters, our water is scarce, and the air outside my home fills with thick smoke and acrid gunpowder. My throat and eyes burn. It’s too dangerous to venture out for bread, yet my thoughts drift to the guilty pleasure of an iced salted caramel macchiato that might bring inner peace, or at least some temporary distraction. What more can one expect from a Gaza millennial living in the impoverished coastal enclave that some call the world’s largest [open-air prison](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-occupation-makes-palestinian-territories-open-air-prison-un-expert-2023-07-11/), under a suffocating blockade for more than [15 years](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/14/gaza-israels-open-air-prison-15)?

I write, and the world watches as violence, blood and darkness descend upon us. We are in unprecedented and terrifying times. But for me and many others in Gaza, it also feels like yet another flare up in the decades-long, stagnant struggle for peace, safety and dignity. What I see in Western media – erasing Israel’s occupation, its blockade and our suffering – bears no resemblance to what I see out my window.

Outside, a sense of uneasy anticipation and anxiety permeates the atmosphere as people in Gaza ponder our uncertain future. We try to predict how much further this all will unravel. We compare the contents of our emergency kits, diligently prepared to ensure our readiness for evacuations from the massive violence Israel is unleashing upon us, on top of its directive to [cut off food and water.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-fighting-monday-intl-hnk/index.html)

We’ve been through so many escalations that we always buy extra canned food and nuts for emergencies and then, due to water being scarce and even cut off, we fill every pot, pan, jar and anything else that will hold liquid in the hope we won’t run out.

Neighbors discuss essential items they need and trade whatever they can spare. One family found themselves with extra diapers, another discovered an abundance of bread. In a silent exchange that spoke volumes, they assisted each other, orchestrating a trade that seemed as significant as any business deal, all through the unspoken language of empathy. They strategize about the most effective evacuation plans and areas to flee to, despite being acutely aware that [we have nowhere, really, to run](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/08/middleeast/palestine-israel-hamas-gaza-conflict-intl/index.html) or escape to. The Gaza Strip [has no shelters](https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20231010_revenge_policy_in_motion_israel_committing_war_crimes_in_gaza#:~:text=The%20Gaza%20Strip%20is%20closed,140%20minors%20and%20105%20women.) or bunkers for us to seek refuge from Israel’s bombs.

I wonder if I should keep quiet, as I’ve been conditioned to do; to bury my fears and anxiety beneath the layers of internal and external oppression that have cascaded throughout my lifetime and for decades before it. The world ignores our plight and denies our humanity, blaming us for our own oppression. I feel like I’m trapped in an alternate dimension, struggling to process my surroundings without losing my sanity or my soul.

The bias and selective outrage of Western governments isn’t new. They have never seen or cared about us as we have suffered under Israel’s occupation, violence and discrimination, year after year, decade after decade.

**They strategize about the most effective evacuation plans and areas to flee to, despite being acutely aware that we have nowhere, really, to run or escape to**

As I navigate the minefield of self-censorship and external oppression, I ponder the worthiness of Palestinians denouncing violence and pleading for a just peace. In a world that ignores our cries, I question whether my words can break through, knowing well that if they don’t, it will likely be because I’m Palestinian.

During every escalation of violence, US media reveal their bias towards Israel, largely omitting Palestinian voices from the equation. The loss of life reported on the news is horrific, yet Western journalists and politicians show much less concern when Israel has inflicted mass violence and casualties on Palestinians repeatedly over the past decades

I yearn for the world to see us, too — to hear us, and acknowledge our humanity and our right to live in freedom and safety like everyone else. Is there still space for raw humanity and aching hearts amid conversations about power dynamics and political victories? If there were, we would have been free long ago.

The relentless, brutal Israeli military assaults and the oppressive conditions of the blockade of our borders have failed to desensitize me. It’s impossible to forget or ignore that these decades of Israeli military occupation color every facet of our existence and fragment our land and our people.

For many of us, this, however limited, is our greatest power: to dream and to feel pain in a world that seeks to dull our edges and dim our brightest lights. For now, I raise my voice, I continue to read, I continue to write, and I continue to hope

The announcement that Israel and Hamas have [reached an agreement](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-21-23) to free some 50 women and children Hamas captured during its brutal October 7 rampage in southern Israel, in exchange for a 4-day truce in Israel’s ground and air operation, comes as the first positive development in six weeks for some relatives of the [more than 200 people abducted](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/middleeast/israel-hostages-freed-lifshitz-cooper-intl-hnk/index.html) by the radical Islamist group that rules Gaza.And it is certainly welcome news for Gaza civilians, who will be thankful for other elements of the deal: an increase in the amount of humanitarian aid entering the strip and the expected release of 150 Palestinians prisoners from Israeli jails — three for every one of the hostages freed, along with the possible extension of the truce of an extra day for every ten additional hostages.

Israel’s Supreme Court will review any petitions against the deal. After that, some hostages, likely to be [mostly children](https://mailtrack.io/link/8cc2c2f6a7273678e84cce6918c8e3936718d95c?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2Fmiddleeast%2Flive-news%2Fisrael-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-21-23%2Fh_f743f1a0f8ecbb40353552fc3235b5bf&userId=3243276&signature=b5ba0dba00918dbe), could start coming home by Thursday.

The deal, however, is hardly the stuff of unalloyed joy — for Palestinians or for Israel.

The war is not over. And the deal arguably strengthens Hamas, allowing it to claim credit, catch its breath and regroup. Whatever Palestinians feel toward the organization that unleashed this round of fighting — and we will not hear many in Gaza now openly criticize Hamas — there’s little question that as long as this group remains in power, the future looks bleak for Gazans.

For Israel this deal is bitingly bittersweet. Negotiating with a terrorist organization that has just slaughtered and brutalized more than 1,000 of the country’s citizens and remains committed to Israel’s destruction — repeatedly [confirming that goal](https://x.com/FridaGhitis/status/1719834186695974925) — is not only hard to swallow, it’s a moral and strategic dilemma of the highest order. Israel has done this before, and paid a high price for it.

When Israeli Cpl. Gilad Shalit was taken hostage in 2006, the government [ended up trading](https://mailtrack.io/link/5e5fb2fbf9b1973654065714b839e9bb13742d68?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2011%2F10%2F17%2Fworld%2Fmeast%2Fisrael-prisoner-swap-explainer%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=9cd8d39ab0298302) more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners from its jails in exchange for his freedom in 2011. When the pale, reed-thin Shalit finally left Gaza after half a decade in captivity, one of the men let out of prison in the deal [was Yahya Sinwar](https://mailtrack.io/link/01ed4a71b6ad2cd29f93afe1e4243f819dc8ace6?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2023%2F10%2F16%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Fhamas-leader-yehya-sinwar-gaza-israel.html&userId=3243276&signature=6f52d3a7c1c4760a).

Sinwar is now the political head of Hamas in Gaza and believed to be [the mastermind](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/11/20/mastermind-hamas-attacks-handling-hostage-negotiations/) of the October 7 operation that killed about 1,200 people in Israel — more Jews than on any day since the Holocaust.

Still, the decision to trade was the correct one. Israel has a long tradition of going to great lengths to save individual citizens. Even if it ends up looking like a mistake in the arithmetic of war, with traded prisoners ultimately [killing more people](https://mailtrack.io/link/b166d5a76b3c4ca7f16a4e4bffdc4199879ddf26?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.timesofisrael.com%2Fpalestinians-freed-in-shalit-deal-killed-6-israelis-since-2014%2F&userId=3243276&signature=9089068e99c2bfd6) than the number of Israelis freed in the trade, making the painful deal is part of the nation’s core identity.

The trauma of October 7 threatened to upend that tradition. Almost every Israeli knows someone who was killed or kidnapped, or someone who lost a relative or friend that day.

Israelis have been learning more and more about the sheer horror of that day. It wasn’t just a massacre; it was a [sadistic frenzy](https://mailtrack.io/link/685a41d46b76648cb450c9b77bf3ea876644144d?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theatlantic.com%2Fideas%2Farchive%2F2023%2F10%2Fwhy-israeli-officials-screened-footage-hamas-attack%2F675735%2F&userId=3243276&signature=6822fdd236a30436) of murder. Hamas fighters’ own body cameras recorded its members slaughtering entire families. Israeli investigators reported seeing the bodies of [small children burned aliv](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-horrific-task-israelis-face-in-finding-and-identifying-hamas-terror-attack-victims), and corpses found [mutilated](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/12/world/middleeast/israel-death-toll-hamas-attack.html).

There are many [reports of rapes](https://mailtrack.io/link/6c6b21841f95257a03c99eda1f3f4ea5b03b5c19?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F11%2F17%2Fworld%2Fisrael-investigates-sexual-violence-hamas%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=3563fc39f5e96dd1), and Israel is [compiling evidence](https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-start-building-oct-7-rape-cases-focusing-on-footage-and-testimonies/) of sexual assaults alongside Hamas’s own [videotaped evidence](https://mailtrack.io/link/b552bad1420cc64f088f7775af178766419e4e18?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.reuters.com%2Fworld%2Fmiddle-east%2Fisraeli-forensic-teams-describe-signs-torture-abuse-2023-10-15%2F&userId=3243276&signature=bee8c79f7c145318) of dismemberment and [decapitation](https://mailtrack.io/link/41dfb23c343a9adcfe18759fc9a6af4c17fa933e?url=https%3A%2F%2Fabcnews.go.com%2FInternational%2Fhorror-israeli-authorities-show-footage-hamas-atrocities-reporters-notebook%2Fstory%3Fid%3D104015431&userId=3243276&signature=8258ac6955c1a29e). Israelis are hearing from the victims and their families. The entire country is enveloped in anger and grief

It’s not the kind of information that compels a nation to seek negotiations with the perpetrators.

Worse, Hamas leaders have repeated their pledge to continue their campaign, vowing to carry out similar missions [again and again](https://mailtrack.io/link/32fbd4f9bbcf0add54aa5a473510c8b593a0f099?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.memri.org%2Ftv%2Fhamas-official-ghazi-hamad-we-will-repeat-october-seven-until-israel-annihilated-victims-everything-we-do-justified&userId=3243276&signature=4a66e6b26db8de1f). And as Israel tries to remove Hamas from power, the suffering of the people of Gaza — trapped between Hamas and Israel — has become heartbreaking, adding to the wrenching moral choices in this conflict, the balancing of life versus security.

For some Israeli hardliners, it was time to change Israel’s hostage calculus, to [keep fighting](https://mailtrack.io/link/dcab07411a33afb183ef7428e974ee69640042cf?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.timesofisrael.com%2Fben-gvir-warns-against-disaster-of-a-hostage-deal-slams-idiocy-of-war-cabinet%2F&userId=3243276&signature=50c34891eaffcf14), and to deny Hamas a break during which it is sure to regroup, redeploy and strengthen itself. But their voices were drowned by the strength of the [hostages’ families](https://mailtrack.io/link/02a838925c6e23a98f1422281284fb88fba495f9?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2023%2F11%2F21%2Fworld%2Fgaza-hostages-families-frustrations-netanyahu-intl-hnk%2Findex.html&userId=3243276&signature=e1f5f50fe952eb67). In a matter of days after the attack, despite or because of their anguish, the families managed to organize themselves into a powerful political force.

Keep an eye on them. After the war, they will remain the tip of the spear as the [Israeli people likely demand](https://mailtrack.io/link/7a84af6d307d0d6900e75ca42da95ccbbec2748f?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.npr.org%2F2023%2F11%2F11%2F1211767117%2Fisrael-netanyahu-growing-opposition-hamas-war-gaza&userId=3243276&signature=b7f8cb744572d756) the resignation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, under whose watch Israel suffered the worst day in its history.

Netanyahu’s fate will not be eased by making this deal, even if the overwhelming majority of Israelis [support the decision.](https://en.idi.org.il/articles/51431) They simultaneously support the government’s aim of fighting Hamas so it can no longer threaten Israel. The two objectives are clearly in conflict with one another. But that’s how it is with moral dilemmas.

The war has been brutal, because Hamas embeds itself among civilians, because Hamas did nothing to build shelters for the people, building them [only for its own fighters](https://mailtrack.io/link/b3678c403ad0e56e6f9ecb12cde47d769a9b5d95?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.timesofisrael.com%2Ftop-hamas-official-claims-group-is-not-responsible-for-defending-gazan-civilians%2F&userId=3243276&signature=1246f6bf752dd9ad), and because a [limited number](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/rafah-border-crossing-egypt-foreign-nationals-gaza-intl-hnk/index.html) of Palestinians have been allowed to flee the fighting into neighboring countries.

Egypt, which has fought extremists in the Sinai Peninsula, which borders Israel, [worries about a sudden inflow of large numbers of Palestinian refugees](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/opinions/opinion-egypt-israel-gaza-hamas-afraid-omari-schenker/index.html) entering and turning Sinai into a stage for launching attacks against Israel, which could destabilize it. It worries also about creating a new long-term refugee population, whose return to Israeli-controlled territory would be uncertain

Perhaps there was a way for Israel to fight Hamas with fewer civilian casualties –— I would not claim to know. But there was no way for Israel to allow Hamas – armed and funded by Iran — to stay in power at Israel’s doorstep. This is not about a Palestinian state. Hamas is not interested in two states, as it tells us over and over. It wants to destroy Israel, and its charter suggests that any agreement that allows Israel to survive, “[is null and void](https://mailtrack.io/link/b25b1d216d60106d12d229093589a95465c47d68?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.timesofisrael.com%2Ftop-hamas-official-claims-group-is-not-responsible-for-defending-gazan-civilians%2F&userId=3243276&signature=3b210e42eda5b31d).”

Even so, Israel had to negotiate.

For Israel, the events of October 7 brought echoes of the Holocaust. And it wasn’t just because of the slaughter. It was also because Hamas was founded on a [1988 Covenant of genocide.](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/hamas-covenant-israel-attack-war-genocide/675602/) Hamas leaders still proclaim their antisemitic, genocidal designs. “Oh, Allah, [bring annihilation upon the Jews](https://mailtrack.io/link/00ea1518cb2c0e50732443930d5b4c691378ddfb?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.memri.org%2Ftv%2Frafah-gaza-friday-sermon-hamas-official-regeb-allah-necks-jews-annihilate-them&userId=3243276&signature=22181509b8b48a5f),” preached a Hamas official a few weeks before the attack.

Imagine having to negotiate with the people who, days after the attack, when asked if their goal is “the [complete annihilation of Israel](https://mailtrack.io/link/f1b35bf77e0a8c0bca1fe8f04bdf80b500b6aae1?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.memri.org%2Ftv%2Fhamas-official-ghazi-hamad-we-will-repeat-october-seven-until-israel-annihilated-victims-everything-we-do-justified&userId=3243276&signature=0870f45bd42936c8),”answered “Yes, of course!”

Hamas is still holding almost 80% of the hostages. This entire process of negotiating a truce is emblematic of the terrible options that have dominated this conflict since the day Israelis woke up to find thousands of Hamas terrorists breaking into their homes with orders to “[kill as many people](https://mailtrack.io/link/ed7ba53d11d799b7a9e2a6a926421ecde7bc12eb?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fnational-security%2F2023%2F11%2F12%2Fhamas-planning-terror-gaza-israel%2F&userId=3243276&signature=a86b49f6290f1998) and take as many hostages as possible.”

This news of the hostage release, and the pause in the fighting, and the increase in humanitarian supplies, is cause for relief for many families, and a breather for millions.

But it’s hardly cause for celebration. It’s a sign of a deep moral dilemma that will continue playing out in profound human suffering.

After six weeks of the deadliest violence in an already blood-soaked history of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, I’ve been asked repeatedly why President Joe Biden remains so staunchly pro-Israel. Why hasn’t the president done more to restrain the Netanyahu government and address the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza?Israel and the US may share the same goal — the eradication of Hamas’ military organization in the wake of the sadistic, inhuman and indiscriminate terror surge against Israel on October 7. But US and Israeli views are clearly diverging on issues relating to humanitarian assistance, the exponential rise of Palestinian deaths and what comes on the proverbial day after Israel’s Gaza campaign ends. And tensions are surely rising between the USpresident and an Israeli prime minister with a [shaky track record](https://www.ynetnews.com/article/b1eavc1s3).

Still, anyone expecting a major rupture between the two ought tolie down and wait quietly until the feeling passes. If needed, they should keep [Biden’s Washington Post op-ed](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/18/joe-biden-gaza-hamas-putin/) from the weekend handy: In it, he indicated no change in the staunchly pro-Israel position he took from the start of the war. Indeed, the president’s persona, politics and policy choices have virtually preempted such an outcome.

There is little doubt that Israel and the US are operating according to two very different timetables. And these two clocks appear increasingly out of sync. Israel — committed to the destruction of Hamas’ military capacity and the end of its ability to governin Gaza— appears to be in [no hurry to declare mission accomplished](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-17/ty-article/.premium/after-six-weeks-of-idf-offensive-hamas-is-still-far-from-surrendering/0000018b-d94a-d423-affb-fbebff290000).

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have not even begun to [confront the bulk of Hamas fighters](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/9/analysis-how-would-israel-find-map-take-and-keep-gazas-tunnels) in many places in northern Gaza or significantly dismantle the miles of tunnel structure below ground. Then there’s southern Gaza, where Hamas has undoubtedly repositioned its assets; the terror group appears to be nowhere near its breaking point. [Israel’s defense minister](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-17/ty-article/.premium/after-six-weeks-of-idf-offensive-hamas-is-still-far-from-surrendering/0000018b-d94a-d423-affb-fbebff290000) has talked about the campaign [taking months](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0w_ZywxQuQ).

It’s apparent that the US clock is ticking much faster, a direct result of growing pressure from its European allies, key Arab partners and a deeply divided Democratic Party, all of whichare starting to coalesce around a call for a ceasefire. Even within the [Department of State and among congressional staff](https://apnews.com/article/gaza-israel-hamas-dissent-protests-biden-01c52457f840d3a6ec9a852469e2c16f), there has been opposition to the administration’s passivity in the face of Palestinian loss of life that’s unprecedented in recent decades. Indeed, Biden himself almost certainly has come to understand that, as greatly as he’s concerned about Israel, the devastation and death in Gaza demands attention for Palestinians, too.

Senior US officials from the president on down have talked about the [need to protect civilian lives,](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/08/blinken-gaza-future-reoccupation-indefinite/) including hospitals; pressed Israel to allow more humanitarian assistance; and drawn clear lines about the day after with respect to Gaza — no forced displacement of civilians, no reduction of territory and no Israeli reoccupation. After [vetoing other UN Security Council](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/europe/us-veto-security-council-israel-gaza-war-intl/index.html) drafts calling for an immediate humanitarian truce, the US finally abstained on a [Security Council resolution](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-un-security-council-humanitarian-gaza-7b6d3057f0f754160bd9dbd9d5a88a0a) calling for humanitarian pauses.

Yet despite the pressure, there’s no indication that the president might support a ceasefire and has intimated, let alone pressed, Israel to set a timeline for ending its military operation in Gaza. His words in the Washington Post seemed to rule that out for now.

On the contrary, the administration seems to be willing to continue its support of Israel at almost every turn. The IDF’s operation against Al-Shifa hospital – Gaza’s largest – is a case in point. The administration has backed up Israel’s claim that the complex was being [used by Hamas for military purposes](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-14-23/h_33ff84e2aa68df5bad1dc819806333b7) without providing much evidence of those claims.

When pressed on Thursday as to [whether Al-Shifa contained a Hamas command and control center](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-lester-holt-of-nbc-nightly-news-3/), Secretary of State Antony Blinken declined to question Israel’s explanations. Instead, he expressed his horror that weapons had been found behind an MRI machine and referred to US intelligence assessments about Hamas command centers in and under hospitals more generally.

Understanding why Biden — as frustrated as he no doubt is with the Netanyahu government — is reluctant to confront Israel with an “or else” if it doesn’t change its wartime tactics and strategy stems from a love for Israel that is deeply imprinted on [his emotional and political DNA](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/08/opinions/opinion-why-biden-supports-israel-so-wholeheartedly/index.html) (unlike his former boss, President Barack Obama).

Even before this war started, Biden’s initial instinct hasn’t been to confront Netanyahu but to see where accommodation is possible and give Israel the benefit of the doubt, especially when it comes to security. He was unwilling, for instance, to impose serious consequences on Netanyahu for promoting a policy designed to [annex the West Bank](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israels-annexation-west-bank-has-already-begun) in everything but name.

In the wake of the Hamas’s October 7 violence — the bloodiest day for Jews since the Holocaust — Biden’s gut reaction [left no doubt](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/10/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel-2/) that he was prepared to give Israel the time, space and support to do what it needed to respond to Hamas’ “pure, unadulterated evil.”

And for the career politician, being good on Israel isn’t some craven genuflecting to lobbies and media pressure. Support for Israel is the right politics because it’s good for America and the national interest. His decades in the Senate, where [support for Israel runs high](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/politics/senate-passes-israel-bipartisan-resolution/index.html), reinforced this conflation.

Biden is hardly naïve on the politics. He knows that Democrats are increasingly divided, with large numbers still [strongly supporting Israel](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/us/politics/house-israel-vote.html) but with a growing number, especially progressives, turning against Israel and calling for a ceasefire. At the same time, Biden in also caught between [Republicans looking to hammer him](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/politics/republicans-blame-biden-israel-what-matters/index.html#:~:text=Sen.,Iranian%20funds%20criticized%20by%20Trump.) if he pressures Israel. In these circumstances, Biden is not going to leave himself open to criticism by Republicans and mainstream Democrats.

Then there are the policy realities. US leverage with Israel might be greater if Washington had more compelling answers about how to wage war in densely populated areas where Hamas embeds its assets without harming civilians; how to surge humanitarian assistance into a war zone; and what precisely should be done the day after. But it really doesn’t. As a consequence, Biden, who strongly shares Israel’s objective of preventing any more October 7s, seems willing to give Israel a wide margin to prosecute its war against Hamas.

The administration has pushed the idea of humanitarian pauses as a way to relieve the pressure it’s under from Democrats, Arab states and the international community. But an outright ceasefire would clearly make Hamas a winner by driving home the reality that, despite immense Israeli pressure, the organization withstood the onslaught to fight another day. It would simultaneously cause a major breach with Israel while being unlikely to bring all the hostages home or solve the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.

The US and Israeli clocks may become even more out of sync as the “day after” in Gaza arrives. The US is already calling for a two-state solution and a Palestinian Authority-controlled Gaza, in stark contrast to Netanyahu. Biden also announce in his Post op-ed that he’s ready to deny visas to extremist Israeli settlers engaging in violence. It’s not impossible that at some point Biden will pick up the phone and say to Netanyahu, “Enough!” But if the death and destruction in Gaza already haven’t been sufficient, it’s hard to imagine what more would make the president change course.

Washington might be reluctant to admit it, but in the get-along business of diplomacy and foreign policy, the US rarely brings heavy pressure to bear on any of its allies and friends, let alone on a special friend like Israel. And for this president in this crisis, especially after the horrors of October 7, Israel remains a special friend indeed. Critics claim that President Joe Biden has failed in his efforts to project American power effectively for the American people and their allies around the world. But I am confident he will go down in history, as he should, for being one of the rare presidents who has accomplished something quite extraordinary: He has carefully defined and quite successfully defended democracy and democratic values before a host of existential challenges.Former Presidents Donald Trump, Barack Obama and George W. Bush wound up ping-ponging from crisis to crisis with no clear sense of what shape the horizon might take, frequently updating their worldviews to match the moment. [Bush](https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/11/17/bush-on-nation-building-and-afghanistan/) was against nation-building until he was for it in Afghanistan and Iraq; Obama was [against foreign intervention](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99591469#:~:text=Barack%20Obama%20delivered%20in%20Chicago,as%20poverty%20and%20health%20care.) until he was for it in [Libya](https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/20/opinions/libya-chaos-civilian-deaths-bergen-sims/index.html); Trump was for [sweet-talking global adversaries](https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/09/politics/kim-jong-un-trump-letters-rage-book/index.html) until [he was against it](https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/02/middleeast/baghdad-airport-rockets/index.html).

Biden, in contrast, has been operating on the basis of a real *weltanschauung* (or worldview). Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told me and other students in his class at Harvard that few leaders, especially presidents of the United States, operated on the world stage with a clear-eyed sense of where they want the world to be at the end of their four or eight years and then worked to get there.

And indeed, few have defined and embraced democracy as a doctrine, viewed crises and partners through such a prism and worked so effectively to further these essential values more than Biden, who spent decades on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and eight years as vice president before becoming the leader of the Free World.

Biden’s latest challenge, of course, is in [Israel and Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/28/politics/biden-israel-hamas-war-analysis/index.html). In the face of a barbaric terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel and the unrelenting response of the government under Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, [Biden has stood squarely by Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/opinions/israel-gaza-hamas-biden-netanyahu-miller/index.html), defined by The Economist’s Democracy Index as the [only democracy in the Middle East](https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/02/01/the-worlds-most-and-least-democratic-countries-in-2022) and North Africa

In contrast to George W. Bush, Biden has modeled how diplomacy as well as force can support efforts to shore up democracy. The US reportedly played a [crucial role](https://www.axios.com/2023/11/23/biden-israel-hamas-hostage-deal) in getting many Israeli hostages released from Hamas. But the US also quickly dispatched [two aircraft carrier strike groups and 900 additional troops](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/26/opinions/israel-hamas-iran-us-middle-east-dunne/index.html) to the Middle East to [back up his warning to Iran and Hezbollah](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-joe-biden-2023-60-minutes-transcript/) not to broaden the conflict.

Those moves not only safeguard Israel but help secure American interests in the region and show that a democratic power can constrain fundamentalist ones.

Biden *is* similar to other presidents in getting little credit for what doesn’t happen. Beyond containing the Israel-Hamas conflict (so far), he also hasn’t been properly recognized for avoiding a [direct US-Russia confrontation](https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/27/politics/us-troops-ukraine-russia-what-matters/index.html) — and likely conflagration — by tempering the [delivery of advanced weapons to Ukraine](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-envoy-nato-no-american-policy-regime-change-russia-2022-03-27/) and restraining its efforts to join [NATO](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/10/politics/nato-biden-ukraine-what-matters/index.html), even as the US has slowly but [steadily ratcheted up the levels](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/ukraine-russia-war-sees-bradley-non-tanks-enter-fray-rcna64963) of military support for Ukraine.

Ukraine, of course, is trying desperately to retain its [democratic orientation](https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/06/politics/ukraine-democracy-lesson-us-blake-cec/index.html) in the face of Moscow’s violent and autocratic challenge. Though now [facing obstacles in Congress](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/04/politics/ukraine-funding-house-speaker-race/index.html), there’s no question that the Biden administration’s support has been essential to Ukraine’s impressive — and, to many, unexpected —success in its continued fight against Russian President Vladimir Putin’s aggression.

Then there’s Taiwan. Chinese President Xi Jinping has redoubled efforts to build pressure to force the island nation’s absorption into mainland China, sending [warships](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/13/china/china-fujian-integration-taiwan-intl-hnk/index.html) and [warplanes](https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/25/asia/china-us-taiwan-military-moves-intl-hnk-mil/index.html) ever closer to Taiwan — even into and through its airspace. But a still-independent government in Taipei is planning a [democratic presidential election](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/01/asia/taiwan-presidential-election-terry-gou-intl-hnk/index.html) on January 13, a robust [three-way race](https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/11/24/taiwans-presidential-election-will-be-a-three-way-race-after-all) in which voters consider an outcome that could well define the island’s future.

This is happening with determined American [political](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/joe-biden-town-hall-10-21-21/h_dff56a90c1b720d24c1cb6552d9071ee), diplomatic and [military](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/30/politics/us-taiwan-foreign-military-financing-program/index.html) support, including Biden being clearer than previous presidents that the US will defend Taiwan. Despite GOP foot-dragging in Congress, Biden has included [funding for Taiwan](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/politics/biden-administration-israel-ukraine-congress-funding/index.html) as well as Ukraine and Israel in a new aid package — an all-but-unprecedented effort at American assistance for democracies under threat.

But while he’s minced no words in continuing to call Xi “[a dictator](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/15/politics/joe-biden-xi-jinping-dictator/index.html),” Biden has [managed the relationship](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/15/politics/biden-xi-meeting/index.html) with Beijing rather than rupturing it in ways that could be dangerous. Just this fall, he succeeded in reopening [military-to-military channels of communication](https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-xi-meet-us-china-military-economic-tensions-grind-2023-11-15/) with China for the first time since Beijing severed them after then-House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan](https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/02/politics/nancy-pelosi-visit-taipei-taiwan-trip/index.html) in August 2022.

Those who see Biden’s abrupt and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan as a failure that damages his record on democracy have themselves failed to recognize a reality that Biden had earlier come to appreciate.

In Afghanistan, democracy never really took root at all. Its ill-conceived and improbable “[elections](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/sr408-political-stability-in-afghanistan-a-2020-vision-and-roadmap.pdf)” were little more than window dressing on a [deeply flawed and corrupt kleptocracy](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/america-enabled-afghanistan-s-corruption-years-taliban-knew-it-ncna1277327) that America had been backing with the [bodies of thousands of its troops](https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/afghanistan-was-loss-better-peace#:~:text=The%20American%20war%20in%20Afghanistan,contractors%20and%201%2C144%20allied%20troops.).

As Sarah Chayes, once a special assistant in the Pentagon, [wrote in Foreign Affairs](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/afghanistans-corruption-was-made-in-america), “Joe Biden was outspoken about his opposition to the intervention.” That underscores the point that Biden’s success isn’t just his principled view of democracies (George W. Bush also prominently called for [democratization](https://www.npr.org/2021/08/17/1028481201/a-mission-to-give-afghans-democracy-became-a-bid-to-repair-americas-own)) but shrewdness in knowing when and where to promote them most effectively.

One could ask what happens when Biden finds himself facing a leader with anti-democratic tendencies  like India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who presides over what close observers have called “[an electoral autocracy](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/04/24/india-s-democratic-regression_6024042_23.html)” in what was long a model democratic nation. There, it would appear, [Biden has shown steadiness in wait](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-no-153-india-overtakes-china-as-the-worlds-most-populous-country/#:~:text=UN%20DESA%20Policy%20Brief%20No,of%20Economic%20and%20Social%20Affairs)ing for the forces that propelled other truly democratic leaders of India’s past to harness the will of the people to return them to power. It has been and will require a most delicate balance that I am persuaded Biden has been adept in implementing.

Biden’s determination to defend democracy wherever it manages to gain a foothold and help it to survive, then prosper, is something that makes him tick and remain appealing to others, as I’ve seen in [so many parts of the world](https://daandelman.substack.com/p/unleashed-voices-in-the-kremlins).  Political leaders and other officials from Paris to Riga that I’ve come in contact with during the Biden years have suggested repeatedly how imperative it is that America retain the values Biden holds so close.

“Democracies are more than a form of government,” Biden told the world on November 2, 2022, in a speech the White House titled “[Remarks by President Biden on Standing up for Democracy.](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/11/03/remarks-by-president-biden-on-standing-up-for-democracy/)” “They’re a way of being, a way of seeing the world — a way that defines who we are, what we believe, why we do what we do,” he explained. “We must, in this moment, dig deep within ourselves and recognize that we can’t take democracy for granted any longer.”

Officials from Israel, Hamas and Qatar have cautioned against US President Joe Biden’s [optimism that a hostage-for-ceasefire deal](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/hamas-demands-gaza-negotiations/index.html) in Gaza could be reached by the end of this week, suggesting that differences remain as negotiators work to secure an agreement.

Biden said Monday during an appearance at an ice cream shop in New York City that he hoped there would be a ceasefire in the [Israel-Hamas conflict](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/middleeast/idf-gaza-evacuation-plan-israel-intl/index.html) by “next Monday,” as the death toll in Gaza approaches 30,000.

But an Israeli official told CNN Tuesday that Israel was “surprised that he [Biden] used the word Monday and that he used the word ceasefire.”

“I don’t know on what basis he said it,” the Israeli official said Tuesday, asking not to be named due to the sensitivity of the subject. The official said Israel was ready to make a deal under the right terms.

“Israel will be ready to release [Palestinian] prisoners even today if conditions are met,” the official said.

Basem Naim, a member of Hamas’ political bureau, told CNN Tuesday that the group was unaware of any ceasefire agreement that could be brokered by next Monday. “There is nothing,”

Qatar, which along with the US is a key mediator in negotiations between Israel and Hamas, added further caution on Tuesday and hinted at a different timeline than that suggested by Biden.

“If there was an agreement you would see me more in a cheered attitude,” Majed Al-Ansari, a spokesperson for the Qatar Foreign Ministry, said Tuesday. “But until now we don’t have an agreement and we’re still working on negotiations on all fronts.”

“We have seen a positive trajectory by the sheer fact that the meetings are taking place, but we have yet to reach a final agreement, where we can hopefully announce before the beginning of Ramadan a humanitarian pause that will ease the tension and would allow us to bring in more aid into Gaza and would allow us to deescalate.”

Ramadan is set to begin as early as the evening of March 10, a week after the date Biden said he hoped to see a resolution.

Ansari said disagreements remain over “numbers, ratios and troop movements,” without elaborating further. He is likely referring to the number of hostages released for Palestinian prisoners and the withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from parts of Gaza.

Asked by CNN about Biden’s comments, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said, “what’s underpinning the president’s optimism is looking at the broad outlines of a deal that we have put in place through negotiations last week and negotiations that are continuing through this week, and the fact that he believes and we believe one is within reach.”

“Certainly, we’d welcome getting one by this weekend,” Miller said.

On Monday, CNN reported Hamas had backed off some key demands in the [negotiations for a hostage deal and pause in the fighting](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/us/white-house-hamas-hostage-negotiation/index.html) in Gaza following Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s accusation that the group’s position was “delusional,” bringing the negotiating parties closer to an initial agreement that could halt the fighting and see a group of Israeli hostages released, according to two sources familiar with the discussions.

[Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/details-40-day-gaza-truce-draft-proposal-being-studied-by-hamas-2024-02-27/) and [Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/27/hamas-studying-truce-framework-as-gaza-fighting-continues) reported Tuesday that Hamas was reviewing a draft proposal for an initial ceasefire lasting roughly six weeks, during which 40 Israeli hostages would be exchanged for 400 Palestinian prisoners.

The Israeli official confirmed to CNN Tuesday that the hope was for about 40 hostages to be freed in the initial stage of the deal, and that Israel is insisting female soldiers be included in the group.

Teams from the US, Egypt, Israel and Qatar met in Paris on Friday and then in Qatar Monday.

Those involved in the discussions have previously said an agreement would likely be implemented in multiple phases and once an initial deal is made it could lead to a truce lasting for as long as six weeks with a group of Israeli hostages released including women, children, the elderly and sick in exchange for a smaller number of Palestinian prisoners than Hamas had initially demanded.

During a truce, negotiations would take place over more sensitive topics like the release of male Israeli soldiers who are hostages, Palestinian prisoners serving longer sentences, the withdrawal of IDF forces and bringing a permanent end to the war alongside the so-called “day after” issues.

On Tuesday, US National Security spokesman John Kirby said there was hope that a temporary ceasefire could lead to a “better approach to end the conflict writ large.”

Referencing the previous week-long pause in fighting that took place at the end of November, Kirby said, “What we’re hoping for is much more aggressive than that. And as we’ve said before, we also hope that if we can get that in place, and both sides can abide by it for the course of several weeks, maybe up to six, that maybe that could lead to something more in terms of a better approach to end the conflict writ large.”

Kirby said he believes “we are getting closer in a negotiation” and hopeful it could “happen in coming days” but did not make any guarantees about that happening before Ramadan.

“It’s not about trying to beat the clock to Ramadan. It’s about trying to get these two sides to come to closure on a deal that again, would get all those hostages out and get them to get the fighting stopped,” he said.

Almost 30,000 people have died in Gaza since Israel waged war on Hamas on October 7, according to the health ministry in the enclave.

At least 1.7 million Palestinians in Gaza have been forcibly displaced, according to [the UN](https://www.unocha.org/news/todays-top-news-occupied-palestinian-territory-ukraine-sudan-syria). More than 1.3 million people have sought refuge in crammed shelters in the southern city of Rafah, where a looming Israeli ground assault has stirred panic among civilians – many of whom fled from fighting in the north.

[President Joe Biden](http://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/joe-biden-news) warned Israel in an interview Monday that it risks losing additional international support as its offensive in Gaza drags on, though he [expressed hope that a ceasefire deal](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/hamas-demands-gaza-negotiations/index.html) could be reached by early next week.

His comments to comedian Seth Meyers aired one day before voters head to the polls in Michigan, a critical November battleground state where [Arab-American activists](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/michigan-primary-uncommitted-biden-gaza/index.html) have been pushing for Democrats to pick “uncommitted” as a way to protest current US policy. Biden, a longtime supporter of Israel, has navigated a delicate political path since the war with Hamas began in early October, but the immense death toll in Gaza, coupled with ever-increasing political pressure at home, has added to his urgency in concluding the conflict.

“Israel has had the overwhelming support of the vast majority of nations,” Biden said in an interview with Meyers. “If it keeps this up with this incredibly conservative government they have … they’re going to lose support from around the world.”

“My hope is that, by next Monday, we’ll have a ceasefire,” Biden said at an ice cream shop in New York City, emphasizing that the parties seemed “close” to reaching an agreement.

Hamas has backed off some key demands in the [negotiations for a hostage deal and pause in the fighting](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/us/white-house-hamas-hostage-negotiation/index.html) in Gaza following Israeli accusations that its position was “delusional,” bringing the negotiating parties closer to an initial agreement that could halt the fighting and see a group of Israeli hostages released, two sources familiar with the discussions told CNN earlier this week.

Israel, however, was “surprised” that Biden expressed optimism for a deal on a ceasefire by Monday, an Israeli official told CNN, but confirmed that Israel hoped a deal would initially involve the release of about 40 hostages, including female Israeli soldiers.

“Ramadan is coming up, and there’s been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan as well, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out,” Biden said Monday.

Qatar’s foreign ministry’s spokesperson, however, said Israel and Hamas have yet to reach an agreement to pause fighting in exchange for the release of hostages from Gaza, though he said he remains hopeful that an agreement can be reached before Ramadan, which is set to start as early as March 10. Regarding Biden’s assessment that an agreement would be reached by Monday, Ansari refused to answer and said the question “should be directed to the White House.”

Biden also addressed the looming Israeli offensive into Rafah, a city that has become home to around 1.5 million Palestinians that is viewed by Israel as the last stronghold of Hamas in Gaza.

“In the meantime, there are too many innocent people that are being killed. Israel has slowed down the attacks and Rafah,” Biden said. “They have to, and they’ve made a commitment to me they’re going to see to it that there’s an ability to evacuate significant portions of Rafah before they go and take out the remainder of Hamas.”

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told CNN later Tuesday that the US won’t support Israel’s planned offensive into Rafah until officials have seen a plan that ensures the safety of refugees seeking shelter in the city. The belief comes despite comments from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu indicating Israel will move into Rafah regardless of whether a humanitarian pause is negotiated in Gaza.

Kirby cited comments from Netanyahu earlier this month that he’s ordered Israel Defense Forces to produce “a plan for operations in Rafah– to include in that a plan for securing the safety of the more than a million refugees that are there.”

But he acknowledged the US has “not been presented with such a plan” to date.

Pressed by CNN’s MJ Lee on if the US wouldn’t support Israeli forces going into Rafah without seeing a plan guaranteeing the safe evacuation of civilians, Kirby said, “That’s correct.”

Biden has been under increasing pressure from his progressive base over US support for Israel, and Michigan’s primary on Tuesday will be the latest litmus test among Democrats over the war. Organizers there [say](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/michigan-primary-uncommitted-biden-gaza/index.html) they hope at least 10,000 people will vote “uncommitted” in the Democratic primary, a nod to the 10,700-vote margin that delivered the state to [Donald Trump](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) in 2016.

In 2020, nearly 146,000 Muslim Americans voted in the general election in Michigan, [according to an analysis by Emgage](https://emgageusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Emgage-ImpactReport-2020-v2.4-lr-1.pdf), a group working to grow Muslim Americans’ political power. Biden won the state by 150,000 votes.

A truce between Israel and Hamas that was [scheduled to begin](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-24-23/index.html) at 7 a.m. local time (12 a.m. ET) Friday is believed to be holding, with civilian hostages held captive by militants expected to be released in the coming hours as part of a breakthrough diplomatic deal following an uneasy day-long delay.

The pause in fighting, part of the carefully [negotiated agreement](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/21/politics/negotiations-israel-hamas-hostages/index.html) announced Wednesday, appeared to be taking effect despitewhat sounded like sporadic Israeli artillery fire and sirens warning of rockets from Gaza in the minutes after it was due to begin.

CNN journalists in the southern Israel city of Sderot said the sounds of heavy weapons fire stopped around 7:18 a.m. local time (12:18 a.m. ET).

They heard what sounded like small arms fire inside Gaza about 20 minutes later, but artillery fire, airstrikes and rockets appear to have stopped.

At least 90 aid trucks have so far entered Gaza through the Rafah border crossing on Friday, an Egyptian official at the border told CNN, carrying desperately needed supplies to ease a humanitarian crisis that’s worsened each day of Israel’s blockade of the enclave. They were among the 200 aid trucks that had entered the Egyptian side of the crossing on Friday morning, the official said.

Two hundred trucks “loaded with food, medicine and water,” as well as others transporting fuel would cross into the Gaza Strip each day starting Friday, Diaa Rashwan, the chairman of Egypt’s State Information Service said that morning.

Sixty-seven Palestinians who got stuck in Egypt during the war traveled back into Gaza via the Rafah border crossing on Friday, hours after the truce went into effect. More Palestinians will be allowed to cross into the Strip starting Saturday if they wish to do so, the Palestinian embassy in Cairo said.

The first hostage release from Gaza is scheduled to take place later Friday, when13 women and children held captive in Gaza are expected to be freed, mediators in Qatar said the previous day. Thirty-nine Palestinian prisoners would also be released by Israel Friday as part of the deal, according to an Israeli official.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it has completed preparations for receiving hostages released from Gaza back into Israel, including readying several locations with medical provisions and support for their initial reception.

The implementation of the [four-day truce](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/22/middleeast/israel-approves-hamas-hostage-deal-intl/index.html) would mark the first sustained break in hostilities after nearly seven weeks of conflict – and the first expected large-scale release of hostages.

The agreement followed mounting pressure on the Israeli government from the families of the hostages, who have demanded answers and action from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

It also comes amid growing international pressure for more humanitarian support for the people of Gaza, where the number of people killed since October 7 now stands at 14,854, according to information from Hamas authorities in the Strip.

Israel declared war on Hamas following the militant group’s bloody October 7 terror attack on its territory, in which more than 1,200 people were killed – the largest such attack on Israel since the country’s founding in 1948.

Militants are holding more than 200 people captive inside Gaza from mass abductions that day, according to figures from the Israeli military.

The IDF said Friday that they destroyed a number of tunnels underneath the Al-Shifa Hospital area in Gaza City they believe are used by Hamas and completed “operational preparations” according to the agreed truce, ahead of its anticipated start.

Israel’s defense minister said he expects the military operation against Hamas will continue “forcefully” after the truce.

**Expected hostage release**

Under terms previously announced by Qatar, a total of 50 of those hostages, women and children, are expected to be freed over a four-day humanitarian pause in fighting.

The first batch of hostages is expected to be released from Gaza at around 4 p.m. local time Friday and handed to the International Committee of the Red Cross, Qatar Foreign Ministry spokesperson Majid Al-Ansari said Thursday ahead of the pause.

American citizens are not expected to be among the first group of hostages released, a US official told CNN. The official added that they remain hopeful that there will be Americans among the initial 50.

An Israeli government official told CNN Thursday the hostages, most of whom are expected to be children with their mothers, will enter Israel at three different locations, which are not being publicized due to the sensitive nature of the release.

Israel’s Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs has released detailed instructions on how to care for released hostages who are children, advising IDF troops on how to interact with them in the moments following their release.

“Children will ask questions such as, ‘Where’s Mum? Where’s Daddy?’ Soldiers should not answer these questions, even if they know the answers. Any questions should be answered along the lines of, ‘Sweetheart, I’m sorry, I don’t know. My job is to bring you to Israel to a safe place, where people you know will be waiting for you and will answer all your questions,’” the advice says.

A representative with the ministry said Friday that professionals will have to “pretty quickly” share relevant information with the hostages about what has happened to their families and communities once they return to Israel.

Of the 39 Palestinian prisoners scheduled for release, they are expected to include 24 women and 15 children, Qadura Fares, head of the Palestinian Commission for Detainees and Ex-Prisoners’ Affairs, told CNN. Hamas published a list of names of the first batch of prisoners set for release, the majority of which are from the occupied West Bank, on Friday.

The deal also includes the further release of [150 prisoners](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/22/middleeast/palestinian-prisoners-potential-release-intl-cmd/index.html) during the four-day period, according to Israel. There is also the potential for an extension and more releases in the days following the currently agreed pause. Most of the prisoners concerned are male teenagers, along with some women, according to an Israeli government list of those who could be released.

The total number of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails is approximately 8,300, according to Qadura Fares, the head of the Palestinian Prisoners Club, a non-governmental organization.

Of those, more than 3,000 are being held in what Israel calls “administrative detention,” which Amnesty International says can be extended indefinitely.

**Humanitarian aid**

The truce has been seen as an opportunity to ramp up humanitarian support to Gaza, though Qatari foreign ministry spokesperson Al-Ansari on Thursday warned “it would be a fraction of the need.”

The enclave has been struggling with severe shortages of basic supplies, food and fuel amid power outages and bombardment, with humanitarian groups and governments saying the levels of aid allowed in in past weeks were insufficient.

The United Nations’ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has been preparing their operations for a

couple of days “to be ready to profit as much as possible of this unique opportunity,”Israel has been highly reluctant to allow fuel into Gaza since October 7, citing concerns Hamas will use it to power its operations, even as aid groups say it’s critical for cooking food and maintaining operations at hospitals. Last week it agreed to allow minimal deliveries.

Israel’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, said in a statement Friday that four fuel tankers and four tankers of cooking gas crossed into Gaza through the Rafah Crossing.

“The fuel and cooking gas are designated for operating essential humanitarian infrastructure in Gaza” and was approved by the Israeli government as part of the truce, the statement said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has dismissed Hamas’ proposals for a [ceasefire and hostage deal](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-07-24/h_ef35214771a09149d5530e3e2e959d2e) in Gaza as “delusional,” in a setback to diplomatic efforts to pause the war.

Speaking to reporters, Netanyahu insisted that there was no alternative to “complete victory” over Hamas in Gaza.

Netanyahu’s hawkish response came hours after he met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and is a blow to the intensifying efforts aimed at securing a breakthrough in the conflict. But the Israeli leader notably did not suggest that Israel would abandon the ongoing discussions mediated by regional powers including Qatar and Egypt, and Blinken said later that there was still a path to a deal.

The Hamas proposal envisaged a three-stage process over four-and-a-half months, during which Israeli troops would gradually withdraw from the enclave, hostages would be released and Palestinian prisoners in Israel would be freed, according to a copy of the group’s counteroffer obtained by CNN.

But Netanyahu repudiated the proposal. “We haven’t committed to any of the delusional demands of Hamas,” he said. “There is not a commitment – there has to be a negotiation, it’s a process, and at the moment, from what I see from Hamas, it’s not happening.”

Israel’s aim was “complete victory” in Gaza, Netanyahu said. “The victory is achievable; it’s not a matter of years or decades, it’s a matter of months.”

In a late-night press conference in Tel Aviv, Blinken suggested negotiations could still move forward, saying he believed Netanyahu’s “delusional” remark referred to specific elements of the Hamas proposals that were unacceptable.

“Clearly, there are things that Hamas sent back that are absolute non-starters and I assume that’s what the prime minister was referring to, but I don’t want to speak for him,” Blinken said.

He added that there was “space to continue to pursue an agreement, and these things are always negotiations.”

“It’s not flipping a light switch. It’s not yes or no. There’s invariably back and forth,” Blinken said.

Hamas said it would send a delegation to the Egyptian capital, Cairo, to follow up on its proposals, according to the group’s spokesman Osama Hamdan.

**A proposal in three phases**

Hamas had proposed a three-phase deal, each lasting 45 days, that would also see the gradual release of [hostages held in the enclave](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/14/middleeast/israel-hostages-relatives-hamas-intl-cmd-scli/index.html) in exchange for Palestinian prisoners in Israel – including those serving life sentences – as well as the start of a massive humanitarian and rebuilding effort.

Contrary to earlier demands, Hamas did not call for an immediate end to the war. Negotiations for a permanent ceasefire would take place during the truce and the remaining hostages would only be released once a final deal to end the war was agreed, the document said.

The proposal was a response to a framework agreement presented by negotiators in Paris at the end of last month.

Hamas’ response had put the focus back on Israel, which is under intense pressure from its allies to scale down the war and ease the humanitarian suffering in Gaza. There have been indications that the United States views the Hamas offer positively, butNetanyahu has pledged [not to stop the campaign](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-06-24/h_69a2d9de1c9ba8b98626b0806b45eebe) until Israel destroys Hamas once and for all.

He reiterated that stance after his Wednesday address, telling Israeli media that Israel would be safe only after it “destroys” Hamas. “Not part of Hamas, not half of Hamas, the entire Hamas.”

The Israeli offensive, launched after the Hamas attack four months ago, has taken an immense humanitarian toll on the strip, with tens of thousands dead and the population of Gaza pushed to the brink of famine.

A weeklong truce in November saw the release of [105 hostages](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/12/world/hostage-israel-hamas-deal-dg/) in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners. Israel believes 132 hostages taken during the October 7 attacks remain in Gaza, 29 of whom are thought to have been killed.

**‘There won’t be any hostages to release’**

The Israeli former hostage Adina Moshe criticized Netanyahu, saying there “won’t be any hostages to release” if his government continued its plan to completely eliminate Hamas.

Moshe, 72, who was kidnapped by Hamas from Kibbutz Nir Oz and held hostage in Gaza for seven weeks, spoke at a press conference for the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, directing her comments specifically to Netanyahu.

“Mr. Netanyahu, I’m turning to you. It’s all in your hands. You are the one. You’re the one who can. And I’m really afraid that if you continue the way you do, the destruction of Hamas, there won’t be any hostages to release,”

The Hostages and Missing Families Forum Headquarters also delivered a message directly to Netanyahu and the Israeli War Cabinet in a press release on Wednesday. “If the hostages are not returned home: the citizens of Israel should know they live in a state that is not committed to their security, that the mutual responsibility in it has died,” the families forum said. “They who do not protect their citizens will find that their citizens lose faith in them and their leadership.”

“The price is unbearable, but the price of abandoning the hostages will be a historic stain for generations to come,”

Hamas’ counterproposal had earlier been met with optimism by those involved in the negotiations, though President Joe Biden had described it as “a little over the top” in remarks to the press on Tuesday.

Before Netanyahu’s remarks on Wednesday, several Israel-based civil society groups and human rights organizations had called for an immediate ceasefire, and demanded the release of hostages held in the enclave, saying a pause in fighting would assist access to vital aid to address the humanitarian catastrophe in the strip.

“In more than 120 days of war in Gaza, following Hamas’ egregious attack on October 7, which killed some 1,200 Israelis and internationals, we have witnessed Israeli bombardments and siege policy causing unfathomable death and destruction in the Gaza Strip,” said the statement, which was published jointly by 17 Israeli based groups including ‘B’Tselem’, ‘Combatants for Peace’ and ‘Breaking the Silence.’

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the [response from Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/middleeast/hamas-counterproposal-israel-pullout-ceasefire-hostages-intl/index.html) on a deal to free the remaining hostages and reach a sustained pause in [fighting in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-07-24/index.html) “creates space for agreement to be reached,” despite containing what he called “some clear nonstarters.”

“We will work at that relentlessly until we get there,” Blinken said at a news conference in Tel Aviv Wednesday following a day of meetings with top Israeli officials.

The top US diplomat suggested that negotiations toward an agreement would continue, despite Israeli [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/26/middleeast/netanyahu-letter-israel-national-security-intl/index.html) dismissing the counterproposal from Hamas as “delusional” just hours earlier.

“There is not a commitment – there has to be a negotiation. It’s a process, and at the moment, from what I see from Hamas, it’s not happening,” Netanyahu said at a news conference just hours after meeting with Blinken.

“I told Antony Blinken we are nearly there with complete victory,” he said, adding that Israel will “not do less than that.”

Blinken, asked about Netanyahu’s remarks, said he believed that the prime minister was referencing the “absolute non-starters.”

The [full Hamas response](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/middleeast/hamas-counterproposal-israel-pullout-ceasefire-hostages-intl/index.html) proposes three phases, each lasting 45 days, including the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, a massive humanitarian effort and freedom of movement for people throughout Gaza, according to a copy obtained by CNN.

“These things are always negotiations,” Blinken said. “It’s not flipping a light switch. It’s not yes or no. There’s invariably back and forth.”

“As I said, we see the space for that. And given the imperative, given the importance that we all attach to bringing the hostages home, we’re intent on pursuing it,” he said.

Still, Netanyahu’s sharp rejection of an end to the fighting is likely to present a challenge to the efforts to reach an agreement. It also suggests that Blinken’s attempts to pressure the Israeli government toward a “humanitarian pause” have yielded little success.

Officials see such a cessation in fighting as central to the objectives they are pushing for both the short- and longer-term in Gaza, particularly as international and domestic US pressure to end the [conflict in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) continues to mount and amid the massive humanitarian toll of the conflict.

The Israeli offensive, launched after the Hamas attack exactly four months ago, has taken an immense humanitarian toll on the strip, with tens of thousands dead and the population of Gaza on the brink of famine. The offensive sparked a barrage of regional attacks by Iranian-backed proxy groups, including by Houthis against vessels in the Red Sea as well as a deluge of strikes by militias against US troops in Iraq and Syria – one of which took the lives of three US service members. The Biden administration is facing outrage from some groups at home over its handling of the situation in Gaza which could cause political damage to President Joe Biden in an election year.

**Civilian toll ‘remains too high’**

Blinken said that even after four months of pressing the Israeli government “on all of (his) previous visits and pretty much every day on concrete ways to strengthen civilian protection, to get more assistance to those who need it,” the civilian toll “remains too high.”

“Nearly 2 million people have been displaced from their homes. Hundreds of thousands are experiencing acute hunger. Most have lost someone that they love. And day after day, more people are killed,” Blinken said.

“As I said to the prime minister and to other Israeli officials today, the daily toll that its military operations continue to take on innocent civilians remains too high,” he said.

Although Blinken acknowledged that Israel had taken some important actions, he outlined in his meetings Wednesday additional “key steps” that he said the government must take to mitigate civilian suffering.

“Israel should open Erez so that assistance can flow to Northern Gaza, where, as I said, hundreds of thousands of people are struggling to survive under dire conditions,” he said.

“It should expedite the flow of humanitarian assistance from Jordan,” Blinken continued. “It should strengthen deconfliction and improve coordination with the humanitarian providers.”

“And Israel must ensure that the delivery of life-saving assistance to Gaza is not blocked for any reason, by anyone,” the top US diplomat said, appearing to reference ongoing protests that have blocked the entrance of aid.

Behind closed doors, Blinken expressed concerns about the potential toll of a military operation in Rafah, where more than a million people have fled. He was briefed about the plans for that operation in a meeting with Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Herzi Halevi and Mossad Chief David Barnea, according to two Israeli officials.

With the potential of Israel’s military operation lasting months longer, Blinken also publicly appealed to Israel to not “lose sight of our common humanity.”

“The overwhelming majority of people in Gaza had nothing to do with the attacks of October 7,” said Blinken, “and the families in Gaza whose survival depends on deliveries of aid from Israel are just like our families.”

Blinken said that Israelis were “dehumanized in the most horrific way on October 7” and that “the hostages have been dehumanized every day since,” but “that cannot be a license to dehumanize others.”

The top US diplomat intends to meet on Thursday, as he has many times in the past, with the families of the hostages held by Hamas in Gaza.

“The hostages are foremost on our minds and in our hearts,” Blinken said earlier in the day in a meeting with Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

**Plans for the ‘day after’ in Gaza**

Blinken arrived in Israel Tuesday night after stops in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar, where the meetings “focused on ensuring … that we can use any pause to continue to build out plans for the day after in Gaza – the security, humanitarian, reconstruction, governance.”

On Wednesday, the top US diplomat also traveled to the West Bank to meet with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas. Blinken pressed Abbas on the need to take steps to “ref﻿orm and revitalize” the PA, “chief among them improving governance, increasing accountability to the Palestinian people – reforms that the Palestinian Authority has committed to make in a recently announced reform package and that we urge it to implement swiftly.”

US officials have suggested that a “revitalized” PA could lead a unified Gaza and West Bank. In November, Blinken outlined a series of principles for Gaza after the conflict ends – no reoccupation by Israeli forces and no reduction in territory among them.

However, Netanyahu has publicly dismissed many of these key tenets, as recently as Wednesday after meeting with Blinken.

“I told Blinken today that after we destroy Hamas, we will secure that Gaza is a safe area forever. History has proven that only one force can prove can achieve this – Israel, the IDF and our security forces,” he said at a news conference. “Israel will be acting in Gaza whenever necessary in order for the terror not to come back.”

Netanyahu has rejected the notion of a Palestinian state or a role for the Palestinian Authority in post-war governance of Gaza. There are also signs that he intends to establish a buffer zone within Gaza, in opposition to US demands that Gaza’s territory not be reduced.

On both this and his last trip to the region, Blinken has stressed that the Israeli government must make “difficult” decisions and move toward a two-state solution if it wants to achieve normalization with Saudi Arabia and if it wants the support of its Arab neighbors for security and reconstruction in Gaza.

The top US diplomat, who met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Monday, said that Saudi Arabia still has a “strong interest” in normalizing relations with Israel, but the Crown Prince made clear that the war in Gaza must end and there must be “a clear, credible, timebound path to the establishment of a Palestinian state.”

At his news conference in Doha Tuesday, Blinken again noted that “in terms of dealing with some of the most profound security challenges that Israel has faced for years, it will be in a much stronger position as part of an integrated region to deal with them.”

“But again, these are decision that will have to be made. None of them are easy. And we’ll continue the effort to prepare all the diplomatic steps necessary to be able to move down that path if that’s the path that everyone chooses,”

The stale, damp air inside the tunnel smells of sewage. The walls are slimy, and they feel like they are closing in. When the light goes off, everything is plunged into complete darkness.

Inside this maze of tunnels under [Khan Younis](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2024/02/06/exp-idf-gaza-khan-younis-evacuate-nobilo-live-gotkine-020604aseg2-cnni-world.cnn), there is a narrow room with an arched ceiling, divided in half by a barred metal gate. The musty chamber, which looks like a makeshift cell, is where the Israeli military says Hamas held at least 12 of the hostages kidnapped and brought to Gaza on October 7.

The Israeli military said it made that assessment based on [testimony](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/middleeast/israeli-hostages-released-accounts-hamas-intl-hnk/index.html) from freed hostages and forensic evidence, including DNA. Some were among those released during the [pause in hostilities](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/12/world/hostage-israel-hamas-deal-dg/index.html) in late November, the military said. CNN could not independently confirm Israel’s account, but details of it tally with descriptions in Israeli media from hostages who say they were held there.

In the darkness underground, the wreckage above feels remote, and silent horror fills the void. Any hostages held here would have had limited sense of time or place. Minutes feel like hours, and after a few turns down different shafts, it’s impossible not to feel disoriented. The compound is hot and very humid. Its tiled walls and floors are wet with condensation. The air feels heavy, as if oxygen is running out.

Israel says that Hamas built a vast network of compounds like this one, connected by [tunnels and shafts](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/17/middleeast/biggest-hamas-tunnel-discovered-idf-intl/index.html) deep underground. The southern city of Khan Younis, which Israel considers one of the “main strongholds” of the group, is the current epicenter of fighting.

CNN was among a small group of reporters granted a military escort by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to see two interconnected tunnel compounds, including the room where the Israelis say hostages were held, in the central part of the city. The IDF has shown similar complexes to other media in eastern Khan Younis. The group was accompanied by one of the IDF’s top commanders, Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfuss.

“They spent years and years building it, this is not a two-year project, this is years of planning. So, if anyone asks how long was October 7 being planned, I say for many years,” he said, adding that he feels some responsibility for Israel’s vulnerability to attack by Hamas. “I failed to defend my people, as a general.”

As a condition to enter Gaza under IDF escort, news outlets must submit photos and raw video footage to the Israeli military for review prior to publication. The IDF did not review this written report.

International media have been blocked access to the strip since the war began. CNN agreed to the terms to provide a rare glimpse into wartime Gaza, as Israel tries to find the remaining hostages and pushes further south into areas where hundreds of thousands of [displaced Palestinians have fled](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/middleeast/palestinians-trapped-rafah-israeli-offensive-intl/index.html).

More than 250 hostages were seized during Hamas’ October 7 terror attack on southern Israel, in which 1,200 people were killed, according to Israeli officials. More than 27,000 Palestinians have been killed and 66,000 injured, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza, in Israel’s aerial bombardment and ground assault on the strip, which has flattened entire neighborhoods including this one.

A CNN journalist entered the tunnel network through the wall of a basement now entirely exposed by a giant crater, the area surrounded by blown-out, multi-story residential buildings.

The IDF said three hostages – Sahar Calderon, 16, Or Yaakov, 16, and Sapir Cohen, 29 – were released from this location during the ceasefire agreed as part of an [Israel-Hamas hostage deal](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/25/middleeast/israel-hostage-families-tension-release/index.html) in late November. The three were abducted from Nir Oz, a kibbutz community near Israel’s border with Gaza.

CNN could not independently verify whether they were held in the compound, or for how long. But Hamas propaganda videos have shown hostages in similar confined spaces with tiled walls.

More than 100 Israeli and foreign hostages were freed during the truce, with Palestinians held in Israeli prisons released in exchange. Israel believes 132 hostages are still being held in Gaza in compounds like the one CNN was escorted to under Khan Younis.

In late January, Israeli forces intensified their offensive on Khan Younis, where medical facilities and other buildings sheltering displaced civilians have been battered, causing mass casualties, according to the United Nations. The IDF has said its operations in Khan Younis are aimed at dismantling Hamas’ “military framework and strongholds,” and has used the tunnels as justification for leveling large swathes of the territory.

Palestinian health officials and paramedics have also reported Israeli tanks and attack drones firing at people trying to flee the vicinity of [two hospitals in Khan Younis](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/24/middleeast/khan-younis-gaza-un-shelter-strike-intl/index.html), where the Hamas-run health ministry said Israeli forces have cut off critical medical, food and fuel supplies. The IDF maintains that Hamas militants are using hospitals in the area for military purposes.

**Underground maze**

Inside the subterranean complex, the shafts are cramped. Connecting passages between rooms are just about tall enough to stand and so narrow that two people passing can’t avoid physical contact.

Some of the tunnels are flooded ankle-deep in mud.

Elsewhere, the floor slopes up and down, the depth varying between some 15 and 25 meters (50 and 80 feet) below the surface, according to the IDF, which said the section of the tunnels visited by CNN ran for about one kilometer (about 1,100 yards).

Goldfuss said the IDF believes Hamas’ leaders, including its [top official in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/07/middleeast/yahya-sinwar-profile-intl/index.html), hid inside this compound deep under Khan Younis as Israel launched its military response to the October 7 attack. At some point during the IDF’s ground operation, this section of the network was redesigned to hold hostages, Goldfuss said, pointing to the cage-like gate that appears to be a more recent addition.

CNN could not verify those claims, or any others that Goldfuss made about who may have been holed up in the labyrinth or what its original purpose was.

What was clear from CNN’s tour is that the compound was used for an extended period of time. Discarded trash, empty food and drink packaging, soiled blankets and random pieces of clothing lie scattered around. In a kitchen fitted with basic equipment, dirty dishes are discarded in a sink.

And yet some thought was put into the interior design. The rooms are adorned with tiles more fitting of a home than the underground compound of a militant group. In the kitchen, the tiles are painted with bowls of eggs and gherkins, baskets of flowers and jars marked, in English, “flour,” “cookies,” and “cereals.”

“You can see in the kitchen; they even took time to make themselves feel at home here. The initial objective of this tunnel wasn’t to have the kidnapped here, this was a strategic tunnel, there is a toilet, there is a bathroom, there is a maintenance tunnel, the leaders spent time here,” Goldfuss claimed.

Emerging from the underground complex reveals the enormous destruction wrought by the Israeli military.

Goldfuss said a building once stood where CNN accessed the tunnel through a huge crater and other shafts spread like a spiderweb through the neighborhood. The devastation is immense – nothing was left of the original structure; its remnants having been bulldozed away to expose the tunnel entrance.

Similar devastation could be seen throughout the surrounding residential area. Most buildings had gaping holes instead of windows, giving them a dollhouse-like appearance. On several balconies, laundry hung out to dry was still flapping in the winter breeze. Books and personal items lay scattered around the rubble.

None of the buildings appeared to be liveable, and there was no one in sight.

Medical facilities in Khan Younis in [southern Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-22-24/h_3b26019d35b6955c9d0d4d2ddc71954e) have been battered amid an Israeli assault in the area Monday, Palestinian health officials said, as the number of people [killed in](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-21-24/h_0ed5ce16dff974f59e66908023fd08c1) Israel’s siege on Gaza continues to rise.

Dozens of people have been killed and wounded in the latest offensive in western Khan Younis, according to the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza. Medical facilities including the Nasser Medical Complex, Al Amal Hospital and the Palestine Red Crescent Society headquarters are located in the area.

“The situation here is completely catastrophic. We didn’t sleep last night. The hospital is entirely besieged,” Ahmad Al Moghrabi, a doctor at the Nasser Medical Complex said in a video shared to his Instagram page Monday.

“There is no way for us to escape the hospital and no way for evacuation. The troops are all around, and the only roads for evacuation are filled with dead bodies,” he said.

The Nasser Medical Complex is receiving more serious injuries than it can accommodate, the health ministry said, adding that intensive care units are at capacity.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff at the Nasser hospital said “there is a sense of panic among staff, patients and displaced people sheltering inside the building,” as they could feel the ground shaking during the strikes, MSF said on social media.

The hospital wards are full and exit routes are blocked, preventing the evacuation of medical staff and patients from the hospital, MSF added.

Health officials also said that Israeli forces Monday stormed the Al Khair Hospital, west of Khan Younis, and detained a number of its medical staff, amid an ongoing “siege” of the area.

The Israeli military said it was targeting Hamas outposts, infrastructure, and command and control centers in Khan Younis and the action demanded “precise operations” due to the densely populated civilian areas.

﻿The military operation, which was launched on Sunday, is being led by Israel’s 98th Paratroopers Division and is expected to last for several days, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said, without providing further details on the timeline.

“Dismantling Hamas’ military framework in western Khan Younis is the heart of the logic behind the operation,” the statement added.

The IDF said it had seen militants at “sensitive sites” such as hospitals and shelters in the tightly packed civilian areas.

The Palestine Red Crescent Society said its headquarters and the Al-Amal Hospital, located in the same neighborhood, are “under siege” by Israeli forces, and soldiers are “targeting anyone who tries to move in the area.”

A field ambulance point has been established outside the Al-Amal neighborhood, where the medical facilities are located, to ensure a continuity of operations.

But the organization said the situation remains “extremely dangerous” and around 80 percent of the entrances and exits to Al-Amal are obstructed. Ambulance teams are facing “significant difficulties in reaching the wounded and injured due to the continuous bombardment in the governorate.”

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has said he is “deeply concerned” by reports of the fighting, warning that that violence near Al-Amal hospital and the raid on Al-Khair not only “put patients and people seeking safety within these facilities at risk, but they also prevent newly injured people outside the hospitals from being reached and receiving care.”

Israel’s siege in Gaza has devastated swathes of the territory, diminished food, fuel and water supplies, and crushed the enclave’s medical system. Over 1.9 million Palestinians have been [forcibly displaced](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1145227), many multiple times, according to the UN’s agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA).

There are 16 out of 36 hospitals partially functioning across [the strip](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-22-24/h_f2932c2e8dab674137be734bc75a515a), including nine in southern Gaza and seven in the north, the UN’s humanitarian affairs office reported on Sunday.

In southern Gaza, three hospitals – Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir El-Balah, and Nasser and Gaza European hospitals in Khan Younis – are “at risk of closure due to the issuance of evacuation orders in adjacent areas and the ongoing conduct of hostilities nearby,” OCHA said.

The Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza has been functioning to a “limited degree” since mid-January, added OCHA.

The Health Ministry said Monday that the number of Palestinians killed in Israeli attacks in Gaza since October 7 rose to 25,295, with at least 63,000 injuries recorded. At least 190 people were killed and 340 injured in the last 24 hours, the Ministry statement said.

CNN cannot independently verify casualty figures in Gaza due to limited access to the area.

Hamas’s militant wing, the Al Qassam Brigades, said in a statement Monday that they were fighting in the western Khan Younis area, killing a number of Israeli soldiers with anti-personnel missiles.

Ahmed Naseem, a resident of Al-Amal neighborhood in Khan Younis, told CNN Monday that “intense” shelling of the area started in the early hours of Monday.

“There was heavy shelling in the area since the early hours of Monday. I could feel it intensely from the building I live in,” Nassem said. “We don’t even dare open the windows to see where these attacks are happening,” he said.

He said that he is “terrified of filming the scenes taking place nearby” because he fears he will be shot at, if a drone catches him in the act.

“We can’t even go to the rooftop because we cannot determine if drones will fire at us,” he said. “A few days ago water tanks were damaged, after drones fired right at them. My cousin, who was filling water at the time of the strike, was close to getting hit, but survived,”

Early on Christmas Day in the central Gazan city of [Deir al-Balah](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/middleeast/gaza-bakery-hunger-israel-hamas-war-intl/index.html), [Motaz Azaiza](https://www.instagram.com/motaz_azaiza/?hl=en) shared a terrifying update on X.

A quadcopter was flying low above the door of his house, he said, and he feared he was about to be targeted in an Israeli airstrike. As a highly visible Palestinian online who had received threats before, Azaiza believed he had reason to be afraid.

Hundreds of people flooded the replies with concern for the 24-year-old Palestinian photojournalist, who has been documenting Israel’s military assault on Gaza on social media since [Hamas’ attack on Israel](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) on October 7.

“*I’m so scared for Motaz*,” the replies read.

“*I hope Motaz is okay*.”

“*Pray for Motaz.*”

Noor, amedical student in California who asked to go by her first name for safety reasons, was one of the people worrying. For months, she’s been following [Azaiza’s dispatches](https://www.instagram.com/motaz_azaiza/) from Gaza, broadcast to his millions of followers: images of his once vibrant neighborhood transformed into a gray wasteland, raw glimpses of carnage in the ashes, and reflections on his own feelings of rage and exhaustion.

Noor refers to Azaiza with the familiarity of his first name. She gets notifications on her phone each time he posts, and worries when too much time passes.

“For so many of us, it almost feels like he’s a brother. He’s a friend, and we’re seeing him suffer in real time,” she told CNN.

Noor isn’t Palestinian and has never been to Gaza. What’s happening there still hits close to home. Her family is Iraqi, and she grew up against the backdrop of the Iraq War. When Azaiza said he feared being killed for his work, Noor found herself feeling scared and anxious for a virtual stranger halfway around the world.

“Their journalism isn’t just journalism. It’s a diary,” Noor said of the Gazans posting on social media. “They’re showing us their lives. They’re telling us, ‘Hey, I couldn’t shower for a week.’ ‘Hey, I barely had some of this to eat today.’”

After hours with no information following that fear of an airstrike, Azaiza finally posted again. A targeted attack on his house hadn’t materialized, but there was bad news elsewhere: a refugee camp was hit in an [Israeli attack](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-24-23/h_7118e0783af22b18688c60dfd1a3e2cf).

Still, his posts signaled he was alive, and Noor could breathe a sad sigh of relief.

**Palestinians on social media are a window into the war**

Like millions of others around the world, Noor is witnessing the war in Gaza through the eyes of Palestinians who are sharing their daily realities on social media. Through their posts on Instagram, X and other platforms, these citizen journalists are putting a face to the conflict.

In return, their followers are developing strong emotional connections with them.

Leyla Hamed, a sports journalist in London, said the first thing she does when she wakes up is open Instagram to visit the profiles of Palestinians she follows and watch their stories one by one. As a journalist herself, she sees them as colleagues and feels a responsibility to bear witness.

“I feel so much empathy for them that I sometimes feel scared to open their profiles, just thinking something bad has happened to them,” she said.

Kanwal Ahmed, a filmmaker and storyteller in Toronto, has a similar routine.

“They’ve become family to the entire world,” she said. “If (creator Bisan Owda) hasn’t posted for 12 hours, there are hundreds of tweets: ‘Where’s Bisan?’ ‘Does anybody know where Bisan is?’ ‘Is she okay?’ If (Azaiza) has posted a picture where you can tell that he’s looking extremely depressed or he’s lost weight, there’s people discussing that.”

These images and accounts from Palestinians offer an instantaneous view that some young people feel like they haven’t gotten from traditional media outlets, Ahmed said. Young Palestinians like Azaiza, content creator [Bisan Owda](https://www.instagram.com/wizard_bisan1/) and freelance journalist [Hind Khoudary](https://www.instagram.com/hindkhoudary/) haven’t just been on the ground since the beginning. They are reporting from their homes and their communities, often persisting through extended communications blackouts [like the current one](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/18/middleeast/gaza-communications-blackout-one-week-israel-hamas-intl/index.html) that began January 12.

Through raw, selfie-style videos chronicling the [ever-present threat of explosions](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzW9lMNLoiB/?igsh=Njd2eGhkdzIybmpq) or the [everyday indignities of displacement](https://www.instagram.com/p/C1U3G4aMwmD/), they’re giving outsiders an intimate look at the human costs of war from the perspective of people who live there. Many of the images they share are so graphic that Instagram obscures them with “sensitive content” warnings.

“Everyone’s getting a chance to tell their own stories,” Ahmed said. “People can tell for themselves … And it’s very hard to look away when you’re seeing somebody sitting in a pile of rubble, or if you’re seeing a five-year-old girl crying next to her father’s dead body.”

Seeing the war directly through these channels changes how people understand it, said Zaina Arafat, a Palestinian American author in Brooklyn who has written about [witnessing the assault on Gaza through Instagram](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/bisan-plestia-motaz-gaza-through-my-instagram-feed.html).

“The constancy of these images and the way that we watch them through our phones very much in private allows for a more direct and forceful impact,” she said. “It’s this very immediate connection between journalist and viewer, which I do think heightens the response.”

**They are changing the way the world sees war**

Israel began its relentless bombardment and ground assault in Gaza after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, killing more than 1,200 and taking more than 200 hostages, according to [Israeli authorities](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-11-23/h_ee7f888912ab74561d86d0a5ced4440a).

Israel says its offensive is aimed at wiping out Hamas, a militant group that the US, European Union and others consider a terrorist organization. But the conflict has also created a humanitarian crisis — one that people around the world are able to see up close.

Direct accounts from Palestinians are one of the most reliable ways for people to understand the devastation in Gaza, where about one in every 100 people has been killed and more than one in 40 have been wounded since the war began, according to the [Palestinian Ministry of Health](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-population-intl/index.html) in Ramallah, which draws its statistics from hospitals in Hamas-controlled Gaza.Israel’s military [denies](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-25-23/h_427a2e4820c69a605ccc0b1b74245fc6) accusations that it deliberately targets civilians.

“This is as close as you can get to factual and minute-by-minute reporting on the atrocities on the ground,” said Marwa Fatafta, an analyst and researcher who leads Middle East and North Africa policy and advocacy work for the digital rights organization [Access Now](https://www.accessnow.org/).

Independent journalism out of Gaza is scant. With notable exceptions, among them international news agencies such as Reuters and Agence France-Presse, most news organizations have been unable to cover the war in Gaza with their own correspondents. Israel, along with Egypt, has largely blocked international journalists from the territory on the [premise](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-says-it-cant-guarantee-journalists-safety-gaza-2023-10-27/) that it cannot guarantee their safety. The few foreign journalists who have been allowed to enter have primarily [embedded with the Israel Defense Forces](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/middleeast/gaza-tunnel-shaft-al-shifa-hospital-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=CNN%20reported%20from%20inside%20Gaza,sensitive%20locations%20and%20soldiers'%20identities.) and may have had to submit their footage to the military for security review.

In December, two months into the war and after weeks of trying, [CNN’s Clarissa Ward](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/14/middleeast/gaza-orphan-israel-hamas-war/index.html) and her team finally gained access into southern Gaza without the IDF. Their trip was facilitated by the Emirati government, which runs a hospital inside Gaza. Still, such independent reports remain rare.

Eyewitness accounts on social media are critical in understandingglobal conflicts, including past [flare-ups between Israelis and Palestinians](https://www.vox.com/22436208/palestinians-gaza-israel-tiktok-social-media). In 2021, Palestinian poet and writer Mohammed el-Kurd rose to [social media prominence](https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3dvdb/mohammed-el-kurd-cnn-interview-sheikh-jarrah) for his activism around a series of forced eviction cases in his Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem.

What’s different this time, according to Fatafta, is how many more people are paying attention.

“What we see now is a continuation of what happened in 2021, but of course, on a massive scale, because also what’s happening in Gaza is unprecedented,” she said.

Before [October 2023](https://socialblade.com/instagram/user/motaz_azaiza/monthly), Azaiza had about 25,000 Instagram followers, according to the social media analytics firm Social Blade. That number has since grown to more than 18 million. Bisan Owda has 3.8 million followers, and Hind Khoudary recently surpassed one million.

**The reports show how much violence has affected their lives**

[Plestia Alaqad](https://www.instagram.com/byplestia/?hl=en) said she wanted to tell stories about the beauty of Gaza before the events of October 7 turned her into a de facto war reporter.

After one of her videos capturing a [blast going off near her building](https://www.instagram.com/p/CyLgScwMiH3/) went viral, she said she felt a duty to continue. Like many Gazans on social media, she posted in fluent English, allowing her photos and videos on Instagram to reach a global audience that now numbers 4.7 million people.

“As a Palestinian living in Gaza, you don’t have a choice but to be a war journalist,” Alaqad, 22, said in an interview with CNN. “Overnight, your life changes. Overnight, a war happens and you don’t have an option. You found yourself reporting to the world what’s happening, whether you like it or not.”

Alaqad has been on both sides of this dynamic, first as a citizen journalist and now as a viewer. Through October and much of November of 2023, she was reporting daily on what was happening on the ground in Gaza, with her followers hanging on to every update.

As overwhelming as it felt at times to have so many people relying on her for updates, Alaqad said she wanted viewers to feel connected*.* She didn’t want people to learn from TV about some new tragedy in Gaza and just move on with their day.

She wanted viewers to see Palestinians as someone’s child, friend or neighbor, with lives and dreams of their own.

“It’s not about me as Plestia,” she said. “It’s about me as a Palestinian. I’d like people to know about Palestine, to see Gaza through my eyes.”

In November, she made the difficult decision to leave Gaza with her family after her uncle in Australia secured emergency visas for them. Now watching from afar in Melbourne, she’s the one refreshing her social media feeds and anxiously texting relatives, friends and colleagues to make sure they’re safe.

**The everyday details are just as moving as the violence**

Viewers who scroll back far enough through these Gazans’ social media posts are hit with sobering reminders of a life before the war. Motaz Azaiza was still documenting flare-ups in the ongoing conflict before the events of October, but he also spent time near the sea photographing children playing and shared a selfie celebrating his graduation from university. Plestia Alaqad filmed a tour of Gaza’s Old City, did a photoshoot in a motorcycle helmet and posed for pictures with dogs.

“They would go to restaurants. They would go to the beach. They would watch their favorite films. They would take care of the gardens. They have a life just like me and you,” said Leyla Hamed, the sports journalist.

Others can still see themselves in parts of these people’s lives, even as they are under siege. Last month, Owda [shared](https://www.instagram.com/p/C04gcL8rB92/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=YzZhZTZiNWI3Nw==) that she had to chop off her signature brown curls because she no longer had clean water or products to care for her hair properly.

It might seem trivial to mourn the loss of hair in such a situation, but it was an intimate detail people could identify with, said Syed Faizan Raza, a design researcher in Islamabad.

“It goes back to those moments of relatability and how you are familiar with these people. Everyone knows these people by name and they’re following them quite diligently,” he said.

**The connections are virtual, but the danger is very real**

The work of these photographers, storytellers and citizen journalists is dangerous.

At least 82 journalists and media workers have been killed while covering the war as of January 16, 75 of them Palestinian, according to data from the [Committee to Protect Journalists](https://cpj.org/2023/12/israel-gaza-war-takes-record-toll-on-journalists/). Reporters in the region also face [assaults, arrests and threats](https://cpj.org/2024/01/attacks-arrests-threats-censorship-the-high-risks-of-reporting-the-israel-hamas-war/), in addition to communications blackouts.

The landscape is so dire that some have decided to cease their efforts. On January 10, blogger Ismail al Dahdouh [announced](https://www.instagram.com/p/C17z2OIKhBt/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==) to his 1.2 million Instagram followers that he would no longer be documenting the war in order to seek safety with his family.

Other Palestinian creators continue to record with relentless dedication. Sometimes, they express despair over whether anyone is listening, or whether their reporting makes a difference.

One day in early December, their exhaustion was especially apparent.

“I no longer have any hope of survival like I had at the beginning of this genocide, and I am certain that I will die in the next few weeks or maybe days,” Owda wrote in a [December 2 Instagram post](https://www.instagram.com/wizard_bisan1/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=703faea0-47cf-4b73-978e-8e86d8b6f9c4). (Israel has [denied allegations](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/12/middleeast/icj-israel-gaza-hamas-genocide-hearing-hague-day-two-intl/index.html) of genocide in Gaza, claiming its actions in the region are in “self-defense” and that it is targeting Hamas rather than civilians.)

“The phase of risking my life to show the world what’s happening is now over. A new phase has begun — the phase to survive,” Motaz Azaiza [wrote in Arabic](https://www.instagram.com/p/C0XRzJwS4PZ/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D) in an [Instagram post](https://www.newarab.com/news/gaza-journalists-motaz-azaiza-bisan-decry-worlds-apathy#:~:text=His%20following%20on%20Instagram%20has,said%20in%20a%20recent%20post.) that same day.

**Despite the pain, people watch to learn and bear witness**

Even as people flock to learn from and support these Palestinians on social media, Noor says the exchange is overshadowed by feelings of powerlessness.

“For (Azaiza, the photojournalist), it’s almost like he’s a representative of his people,” Noor said. “By extension, your care isn’t just for him. Your care is for everyone because he is showcasing what his people are suffering.”

Still, Noor and other followers hope that their advocacy for Palestinian stories can keep public attention on the crisis in Gaza and put pressure on elected officials to bring about an end to the fighting.

In the US, people are encouraging each other to [contact their representatives](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/11/22/fax-congress-israel-gaza/) in Congress and demand they support a lasting ceasefire. Protests, demonstrations and public gatherings in support of Palestinians have grown in size since the start of the war, according to data from scholars and researchers with the [Crowd Counting Consortium](https://countingcrowds.org/). A [December 2023 Quinnipiac University poll](https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3887) found that US voter support for sending military aid to Israel had dropped. Israel is facing mounting international pressure to agree to a ceasefire, or at least moderate its offensive in Gaza. And in what it describes as a new phase of the conflict, the Israeli military said it has started to [withdraw some troops](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/middleeast/israel-military-withdrawl-gaza-rift-intl/index.html.).

It’s difficult to attribute these events to any one factor, and Fatafta cautions against drawing too straight a line between social media and changing opinions on the war. There is a rich history of solidarity with Palestine in the Arab world and beyond, and Fatafta said the massive social media followings of Palestinians like Azaiza partly reflect that.

“And it’s only growing, because also the events on the ground are beyond atrocious, and they do merit a global reaction,” Fatafta said.

“If there wasn’t, I would be scared to live in this world.”

Constantly checking Instagram to make sure Azaiza and other Palestinians documenting the war are still alive feels dystopian, Noor said. She’s had to take a break at times because the horrors she was seeing through her phone were affecting her ability to function. But she knows those in Gaza don’t have that luxury, so she never looks away for long.

“The least that I can do, or anybody can do, is to bear witness,”

The UN’s top court ordered Israel to prevent genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, but stopped short of calling for Israel to suspend its military campaign in the war-torn enclave, as South Africa had requested.

In a hearing in The Hague, the Netherlands, on Friday, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) said Israel must “take all measures” to limit the death and destruction caused by its [military campaign](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-26-24/index.html), prevent and punish incitement to genocide, and ensure access to humanitarian aid.

South Africa had [accused](https://cnn.com/2024/01/11/middleeast/south-africa-israel-genocide-icj-hague-day-one-intl/index.html) Israel of violating international laws on genocide, written in the wake of the Holocaust, and wanted the court to order Israel to cease fire in Gaza.

While the ICJ did not order Israel to end its war, the ruling represents a blow to Israel, which had hoped the case would be dismissed outright.

Friday’s decision related only to South Africa’s request for emergency measures, which act like a restraining order while the court considers the full merits of the genocide case, which could take years.

“The catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is at serious risk of deteriorating further before the court renders its final judgment,” Judge Joan Donoghue, the ICJ’s president, said Friday.

By an overwhelming majority, the court’s 17-judge panel voted in favor of six emergency measures, ordering Israel to “take all measures within its power” to prevent acts which could fall foul of the 1948 Genocide Convention, and to ensure its military does not commit genocidal acts in Gaza.

It also ordered Israel to “prevent and punish the direct and public incitement to commit genocide,” and to guarantee the “provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance” in the enclave.

Israel was also ordered to preserve evidence related to allegations of genocide and report back to the court on its compliance with these measures in a month.

The ICJ’s decisions are binding and cannot be appealed, but it has no way of enforcing them. In 2022 it ordered Russia to immediately suspend its invasion of Ukraine, but Moscow’s war rages on nearly two years later.

Israel had already indicated it would not accept the ICJ’s orders. “Nobody will stop us – not The Hague, not the axis of evil and not anybody else,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office wrote on X.

The court’s panel ordinarily comprises 15 judges, but was expanded in this case by additional judges from South Africa and Israel.

Israel’s judge Aharon Barak, an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor and former president of the country’s Supreme Court, voted in favor of two of the emergency measures, ordering Israel to curb incitements to genocide and to ensure aid can enter the enclave.

**Both sides hail ruling**

Apart from its call for a halt in fighting, the bulk of South Africa’s nine requests to the court were granted.

The Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister, Riyad al-Maliki, said the ICJ had “ruled in favor of humanity and international law” and thanked South Africa for bringing the case to the court.

South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa called the ruling a “victory for international law, for human rights, and above all for justice.”

While South Africa said it was “disappointed” that the court did not order a ceasefire, its Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said she believes Israel will have to observe one if it is to comply with the other measures ordered.

“In exercising the order, there would have to be a ceasefire,” she said after the hearing. “Without it the order doesn’t actually work.”Despite the court’s ordering emergency measures, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the ruling as a rejection of discrimination against his country.

“Like every country, Israel has an inherent right to defend itself,” he said in a short video message. “The vile attempt to deny Israel this fundamental right is blatant discrimination against the Jewish state, and it was justly rejected.”

However, not all members of Netanyahu’s cabinet welcomed the ruling. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant criticized the court’s decision to hear the case altogether, claiming the ICJ “granted South Africa’s antisemitic request to discuss the claim of genocide in Gaza, and now refuses to reject the petition outright.”

Israeli war cabinet minister Benny Gantz said, “Those truly needing to stand trial are those that murdered and kidnapped children, women and the elderly,” referring to those killed and taken hostage by Hamas on October 7.

Palestinian militant group Hamas also welcomed the court’s decision in a statement on Friday, saying it anticipates further court decisions convicting Israel “of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.”

**‘A very significant rebuke’**

Legal experts have said that, while the court did not grant the most explosive of South Africa’s requests, in finding that Israel is “plausibly” violating laws on genocide, its decision is damning.

“Even though it is not a definitive verdict, it is a very significant rebuke for the armed forces of a democratic state that sometimes says it has the most moral army in the world,” Janina Dill, co-director at Oxford University’s Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict, told CNN.

“The world court looked at (Israel’s) actions in Gaza and said it is not implausible that it’s violating the Genocide Convention. I don’t see how that can possibly be a victory. In some sense it’s a rebuke, and it is also a rebuke to the governments of the world that support Israel in its actions in Gaza,” she said.

In the initial hearing two weeks ago, South Africa alleged that Israel’s leadership was “intent on destroying the Palestinians as a group in Gaza,” and that its aerial and ground assaults aimed to “bring about the destruction” of Palestinians in the enclave.

South Africa and Israel are both parties to the Genocide Convention, meaning they are obliged not to commit genocide and to prevent and punish it.

Israel reacted furiously to the accusation and rejected what it called South Africa’s “grossly distorted story,” telling the court its war in Gaza was fought in self-defense, that it was targeting Hamas rather than Palestinian civilians, and that its leadership had not displayed genocidal intent.

It said the accusation of genocide was an attempt to “pervert the meaning” of the term and empty it of its “unique force.”

Israel claimed if genocidal acts had been committed, they were “perpetrated against Israel” on October 7, when Hamas fighters stormed into the country from Gaza, killing more than 1,200 people and taking 240 hostage, according to Israeli officials. Israel’s retaliatory offensive in Gaza has since killed more than 26,000 people, according to the Hamas-run health ministry in the enclave

A historic ruling by the United Nations’ top court in [a genocide case against Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/26/middleeast/israel-genocide-case-icj-hague-ruling-south-africa-intl) on Friday was welcomed by the three main parties it involved: Israel, South Africa and the Palestinians. But at the same time, no one got what they asked for.

The International Court of Justice in The Hague, the Netherlands, ordered Israel to “take all measures” to prevent genocide in Gaza after South Africa accused Israel of violating international laws on genocide in its war in the territory.

It rejected Israel’s request for the case to be thrown out, but it also stopped short of ordering Israel to halt the war as South Africa has asked.

“I would have wanted a ceasefire,” said South African foreign minister [Naledi Pandor](https://twitter.com/AJEnglish/status/1750881275169182034) after the ruling in The Hague. She said that she was still satisfied with the outcome.

Israel went to war with Hamas in Gaza after the Palestinian militant group launched a brutal attack on the country on October 7, killing 1,200 people and taking more than 250 people hostage.

The war has resulted in the death of more than 26,000 people in Gaza, according to the Hamas-run health ministry, and left much of the enclave in ruins. Israel has pledged not to stop its campaign until all the remaining hostages are released and Hamas is destroyed.

The case at the ICJ marks [the first time](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/middleeast/israel-genocide-case-world-court-gaza-mime-intl/index.html) Israel has been brought before the court on accusations of violating the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, which was drafted in part due to the mass killings of Jewish people in the Holocaust during the Second World War.

Still, many Israelis hailed the ruling on Friday as a win for the Jewish state. Eylon Levi, an Israeli government spokesperson, said the court “[dismissed](https://twitter.com/EylonALevy/status/1750876044742021533) (South Africa’s) ridiculous demand to tell Israel to stop defending its people and fighting for the hostages.” [Avi Mayer](https://twitter.com/AviMayer/status/1750864623228612629), the former editor in chief of the Jerusalem Post called it “a devastating blow to those accusing the Jewish state of ‘genocide’.”

“The most dramatic thing is that no ceasefire was ordered,” Shelly Aviv Yeini, head of the international law department at the Hostages and Missing Persons Families Forum, told CNN, adding that a potential ceasefire order was Israel’s biggest fear, especially as it would have come as over a hundred hostages remain in Gaza.

The discourse in Israel has so far focused on only ending the war once the hostages are freed, she said, adding that Israel would have “struggled to live” with a ceasefire order that doesn’t guarantee the return of the captives.

“So, I think this is quite (an) expected outcome, and something that Israel will be able to comply with,” she said, adding that the court’s order for Israel to deliver humanitarian aid and report back to the ICJ on its actions is “doable.”

**A ‘dark day’ in Israel’s history**

Despite the outcome being perceived by some as being in Israel’s favor, experts warned of the reputational damage faced by the Jewish state.

“I would not call it a win, but I would say it could have been worse,” Robbie Sabel, professor of international law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told CNN. “The fact that in public eyes there’ll be an association that Israel’s acts could have led to genocide, clearly this is harmful public relations.”

Friday’s measure was an interim measure by the ICJ as the court considers a full ruling on whether Israel is guilty of violating the Genocide Convention. That ruling could take years.

Sabel said that while he is “absolutely convinced” that the ICJ will eventually find Israel not guilty of genocide, he worries that by that time “the public may have forgotten that.”

“If they had asked us to stop defending ourselves, we would have had a problem, and at least we don’t have that problem,” he said.

Yeini said it was nonetheless a “a very dark day” in Israel’s history.

For some Palestinians, however, the court’s ruling didn’t go far enough.

Mohammed el-Kurd, a Palestinian activist from Jerusalem, said the ICJ failed on South Africa’s “most important request” to suspend the military operations. “Not shocking, but stings nonetheless,” he said on X, formerly Twitter.

“Until the Israeli regime’s genocidal assault on Gaza stops, we should keep protesting and disrupting in every way possible. This is today’s lesson,”

Israel is [appearing before](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-04-24/h_3c232d021587386045c6b8ff413c601f) the International Court of Justice in a high stakes case that could change the course of the brutal war in Gaza.

It is an unprecedented case. Experts say it is the first time that the Jewish state is being tried under the United Nations’ Genocide Convention, which was drawn up after the Second World War in light of the atrocities committed against the Jewish people during the Holocaust.

The South African government, a successor to the apartheid regime that was made a pariah on the international stage three decades ago, [brought the case against Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/29/middleeast/south-africa-icj-israel-genocide-intl/index.html), accusing it of being in breach of its obligations under the convention in its war on Hamas in Gaza.

Israel has [firmly rejected the claim](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-07-24/h_1d8eac50c9f15e250ad5d151824de796), with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calling it a “false accusation.”

Israeli President Isaac Herzog said on Tuesday that his country will present a case “using self-defense” to show that it is doing its “utmost” under “extremely complicated circumstances” to avert civilian casualties in Gaza.

Eliav Lieblich, a professor of international law at Tel Aviv University, told CNN the case is significant politically and legally. “An allegation of genocide is the gravest international legal allegation that can be made against a state,” he said.

Here’s what we know about this case.

**What is South Africa saying?**

South Africa has taken Israel to the ICJ, also known as the World Court, on claims that it is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and failing to prevent genocide.

On the first of two days of hearings, South Africa on Thursday told the court that Israel’s leadership had “declared their genocidal intent” in public comments surrounding the war, and that the actions of its military showed a “pattern of genocidal conduct.”

South Africa’s representatives argued that “the publicly available evidence of the scale of the destruction resulting from the bombardment of Gaza, and the deliberate restriction of food, water, medicines and electricity available to the population of Gaza, demonstrates that the government of Israel… is intent on destroying the Palestinians in Gaza as a group.”

“The acts in question include killing Palestinians in Gaza, causing them serious bodily and mental harm, and inflicting on them conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction,” South Africa added in its [84-page filing](https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf) to the court.

More than 23,000 people have been killed in Gaza since October 7, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza.

The United Nations defines genocide as an act “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”

The [UN says](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml) that it was developed “partly in response to the Nazi policies of systematic murder of Jewish people during the Holocaust.”

In eight pages, the filing at the ICJ details what South Africa describes as “expressions of genocidal intent” by Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and members of his cabinet.

South Africa has also asked the court to issue “[provisional measures](https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf)” ordering Israel to stop its war in Gaza, which it said was “necessary in this case to protect against further, severe and irreparable harm to the rights of the Palestinian people.” A provisional measure is a temporary order to halt actions, or an injunction, pending a final ruling.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a grouping of 57 Muslim countries, as well as Jordan, Turkey and Malaysia have so far backed the case.

**What is the International Court of Justice?**

The ICJ is based in The Hague in the Netherlands and was set up in June 1945 by the Charter of the United Nations.

The court tries governments while the International Criminal Court, also in The Hague, [prosecutes individuals](https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/icc/qna.htm#:~:text=The%20International%20Court%20of%20Justice%20(ICJ%20or%20World%20Court)%20is,tribunal%20that%20will%20prosecute%20individuals.). Israel [doesn’t recognize](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/17/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-crimes-icc-referral/index.html) the ICC so the court has no jurisdiction over it. Israel however is a signatory to the Genocide Convention, which gives the ICJ jurisdiction over it.

Member states of the UN and those who have accepted the ICJ’s jurisdiction can present cases. The court [accepts cases](https://www.icj-cij.org/how-the-court-works#:~:text=Only%20States%20(States%20Members%20of,be%20parties%20to%20contentious%20cases.) in which the states involved have each accepted its jurisdiction. The ICJ is composed of 15 judges who serve nine-year terms. [Current judges](https://www.icj-cij.org/current-members) are from the US, Russia, China, Slovakia, Morocco, Lebanon, India, France, Somalia, Jamaica, Japan, Germany, Australia, Uganda and Brazil. Five seats come up for election every three years, with no consecutive term limit.

[Four new judges](https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1143417) will take their seats in February, one of whom is South Africa’s Dire Tladi.

Ad-hoc judges can be appointed by parties in contentious cases (between two states) – in this instance Israel and South Africa – bringing the number of judges in the case to 17. South Africa [has appointed](https://twitter.com/ClaysonMonyela/status/1743173341890937026) Dikgang Moseneke, the country’s former deputy chief justice, and Israel has named [Aharon Barak](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-taps-supreme-court-ex-president-barak-icj-panel-2024-01-07/), ex-president of the country’s Supreme Court.

Experts say a final ruling could take years.

**How has Israel responded?**

Israel has called the case a “[blood libel](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-02-24/h_03dc928f967930515396666d2c54a013)” by South Africa, a thinly veiled accusation of antisemitism, and Netanyahu has in turn said that it is Hamas that has committed genocide, adding the Israeli military is acting in “the most moral way” and “does everything to avoid harming civilians.”

“And I ask: where were you, South Africa, and the rest of those who slander us, where were you when millions were murdered and displaced from their homes in Syria, Yemen and other arenas. You weren’t there,” the prime minister said.

Israel will nonetheless appear before the court.

That’s because it is a signatory to the UN’s 1948 [Genocide Convention](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf), which was drafted in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The treaty gives the ICJ the authority to adjudicate in cases, which can be brought by parties not directly affected by the alleged genocide in question.

“Since the court clearly has jurisdiction, it would be strange if Israel would simply not appear,” said Lieblich. “Also, genocide is a grave allegation, and states usually want to make their case.”

The Israeli public’s view of the case reflects the political disagreements in the country, Lieblich said. “Some view the proceedings as just another case of international bias against Israel. Many others are angry because they think that the case was only made possible because of irresponsible statements by far-right politicians, that in their views don’t represent actual policy.”

But he said that few in the Israeli mainstream are willing to accept the genocide allegations. “They mostly view the war as one of self-defense against Hamas, which due to the latter’s tactics result in wide but unintended harm to civilians.”

Polls show that Israelis [overwhelmingly support](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-31-23/h_20f49090048c65d36986cd473850ec5e) the war.

Citing an Israeli diplomatic cable, Axios reported that Israel has mobilized its diplomats to lobby host nations to back its position and create international pressure against the case. Its “strategic goal,” it said, is for the court to reject the request for an injunction, refrain from accusing Israel of committing genocide, and acknowledge that it is operating according to international law.

“A ruling by the court could have significant potential implications that are not only in the legal world but have practical bilateral, multilateral, economic, security ramifications,” Axios cited the cable as saying.

Israeli government spokesperson Eylon Levy [said Pretoria](https://twitter.com/EylonALevy/status/1742211234798170141) is “criminally complicit with Hamas’ campaign of genocide against our people.”

He also accused it of double standards, and backing former [Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir](https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/15/africa/south-africa-summit-icc-omar-al-bashir-arrest/index.html), who faces a warrant issued by the ICC.

“How tragic that the rainbow nation that prides itself on fighting racism will be fighting pro bono for anti-Jewish racists,” he said in a January 2 speech posted on X. “We assure South Africa’s leaders: History will judge you. And it will judge you without mercy.”

Lieblich said South Africa appears to be positioning itself in opposition to the US’ dominance in the international order.

“While it pursues the case against Israel, South Africa has criticized the ICC’s arrest warrant against [Vladimir Putin](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/17/europe/icc-russia-war-crimes-charges-intl/index.html), and has also refrained in the past from arresting [Omar al-Bashir](https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/11/africa/sudan-handover-omar-al-bashir-icc-intl/index.html#:~:text=In%202009%2C%20the%20ICC's%20chief,the%20United%20Nations%20Security%20Council.),” he said. “So, there is a clear international statement here. South Africa has been very vocal about what it views (as) Western ‘double standards’ and this case is a part of that campaign.”

**Why is this case significant?**

While the ICJ has ruled against Israel in the past, it did so through non-binding “advisory opinions” that are requested by UN bodies such as the General Assembly.

This is the first time Israel is being sued in the ICJ in what is known as a “contentious case,” where states directly raise cases against each other.

In 2004, the ICJ issued an [advisory opinion](https://www.icj-cij.org/case/131) declaring Israel’s separation barrier in the occupied West Bank to be in violation of international law, and called for it to be torn down. Israel ignored that decision.

If the ICJ eventually rules that Israel is directly responsible for genocide, it will be the first time it has found a state has commited genocide, experts said.

“This would be a significant precedent first and foremost because the ICJ never ruled, so far, that a state actually committed genocide,” Lieblich said. “The farthest it went was to rule that Serbia failed to prevent genocide by militias in Srebrenica. In this sense, such a ruling would be legally uncharted territory.”

While no state has been found to be directly responsible for genocide by the court, both Myanmar and Russia have faced provisional measures in genocide cases in recent years.

All ICJ [judgements are final](https://www.icj-cij.org/frequently-asked-questions), without appeal and binding.

But the ICJ can’t guarantee compliance. In March 2022, for example, [the court ordered](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/world-court-rule-emergency-measures-ukraine-vs-russia-case-2022-03-16/#:~:text=THE%20HAGUE%2C%20March%2016%20(Reuters,by%20Moscow's%20use%20of%20force.) Russia to immediately halt its military campaign in Ukraine. Kyiv, which brought the case, disputed the grounds for Russia’s invasion, and asked for emergency measures against Russia to halt the violence before the case was heard in full.

**What happens if the court orders Israel to halt the war?**

Israel is set to appear in public hearings before the court on Friday to contest South Africa’s genocide accusations.

A ruling on genocide could take years to prove, but the injunction on the Gaza war that Pretoria has asked the ICJ for could come much sooner.

Daniel Machover, a London-based lawyer and international justice expert, told CNN that a provisional measure should be a quick decision that would be taken before there is a final ruling on genocide.

South Africa, he said, only needs to demonstrate that it has standing to bring the case, has acted on its duty to prevent genocide, that there is a “plausible legal argument” that violations of the Genocide Convention are or may be taking place, and that there is a real and imminent risk that irreparable prejudice will be caused to Gaza residents before the court gives its final decision, such that the court needs to order Israel to stop the war.

Francis Boyle, an American human rights lawyer [who won two requests](https://www.democracynow.org/2024/1/2/south_africa_israel_genocide_icj) at the ICJ under the Genocide Convention [against Yugoslavia](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/04/09/world-court-orders-belgrade-to-prevent-genocide-in-bosnia/8733f769-3381-4d05-ab9a-3af03e6b5fef/) on behalf of Bosnia and Herzegovina, told Democracy Now that based on his review of the documents submitted by South Africa, he believes Pretoria will indeed win “an order against Israel to cease and desist from committing all acts of genocide against the Palestinians.”

Boyle, based on his experience in the Bosnian case, said the order could come within a week of this week’s hearings.

Lieblich doubts that Israel would cease the fighting altogether should the court issue an injunction on the war. Instead, it could attack the legitimacy of the court and its judges, “considering that some of them are from states that don’t recognize Israel.” It would also matter whether the decision is unanimous, he added.

“The consequences of non-compliance might range from reputational harm and political pressure to sanctions and other measures by third states or further resolutions in the UN,” he said. “The key for Israel would probably be how its key allies would act in such a case.”

He added that while the threshold for an injunction is relatively low, in the main case, proving genocide requires two elements: proof that certain unlawful acts were committed, and that these acts were committed with specific intent to destroy a certain group.

“In past ICJ cases the court required a high threshold to prove such allegations,” he said. “Here the challenge for South Africa would be to prove that statements by some Israeli officials actually reflect the state’s ‘intent’ as a whole, and also that Israel’s actions on the ground were both unlawful and actually tied to an intent to destroy the group as such.”

**Could a ruling have implications outside Israel?**

The fallout of an ICJ ruling could spread beyond Israel, according to experts. It would not only embarrass Israel’s closest ally, the US, but could also deem Washington complicit in the alleged violation of the Genocide Convention.

“Even though the South African application focuses on Israel, it has huge implications for the United States, especially President Joe Biden and his principal lieutenants,” [wrote John Mearsheimer](https://mearsheimer.substack.com/p/genocide-in-gaza), an American political scientist.

“Why? Because there is little doubt that the Biden administration is complicitous” in Israel’s war, he said.

Biden has acknowledged that Israel is carrying out [“indiscriminate”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/14/politics/biden-netanyahu-tensions-analysis/index.html) bombing in Gaza, but he has also vowed to protect the country. The US has [bypassed Congress twice](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/29/politics/biden-congress-israel-military-aid/index.html) to sell military equipment to Israel during the war.

“Leaving aside the legal implications of his behavior, Biden’s name – and America’s name – will be forever associated with what is likely to become one of the textbook cases of attempted genocide,” Mearsheimer wrote.

Even if Israel ignores an order by the ICJ, there will be a legal obligation among other signatories to comply, said Machover. “So, anyone assisting Israel at that point will be in breach of that order.”

“We could have worldwide litigation if states don’t stop assisting Israel… there will be legal ripples across the world” he said.

The case could also have an impact on the Israeli public, Machover said. He believes that a significant number of Israelis “have not looked in the mirror” and lack awareness of the real impact of the war on Palestinians in Gaza.

The ICJ case, he hopes, would prompt the Israeli public to engage in “some sort of self-reflection.”

A British surgeon who led an emergency medical team in central Gaza says the situation at Al-Aqsa hospital has been “beyond any doubt the worst thing” he’s seen in his career, as Jordan’s monarch warned Israel’s bombardment was creating an “entire generation of orphans.”

“There’s been multiple traumatic amputations of children … horrific burns, the likes of which I’ve never seen before,” Dr. Nick Maynard told CNN’s Isa Soares on Monday after his team found themselves with no choice but to withdraw from the hospital, following increased Israeli military activity.

He said that often “there is no pain relief to give to these patients at all,” underscoring the dire humanitarian situation and lack of medical supplies in the Palestinian enclave following more than three months of Israeli bombardment.

“I think it’s fair to say I’ve never seen anything like this. And I never expect that in my life I would see such an appalling situation,” said Maynard, who was speaking from the Egyptian capital of Cairo on Monday after leaving Gaza.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has repeatedly said it is not targeting civilians. The IDF has also said that Hamas uses civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, as shields for its attacks on Israel, and that attacking those targets are essential as it works to eliminate Hamas from the enclave.

Israel has also said some hospitals are being used as command centers but has provided limited evidence to support that claim.

The IDF’s operations are contentious, with humanitarian organizations warning that a growing number of medical facilities across Gaza are rendered unable to provide basic services.

“I’ve been going to Gaza for nearly 15 years now, I have many friends who work in hospitals there. There are many examples of hospitals being attacked. In the last two days since I left Al-Aqsa hospital, there have been attacks on the hospital,” Maynard told CNN.

The British surgeon had been in Gaza for two weeks, an experience he described as “frightening,” saying his team pulled out as the conflict came closer.

“There was an attack on the intensive care unit,” he said. “We were due to leave it about that time anyways but the following morning, the whole area was taken out of the de-confliction (zone), and we were told by the Israeli Defense Forces that we would not be able to go.”

CNN has reached out to the Israeli military for comment but is yet to hear back.

The doctor said his organization, Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), and Doctors Without Borders, also known as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), were both operating at the hospital but “both sets of foreign doctors had to leave.”

MAP and the emergency medical team of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) announced their withdrawal from the Al-Aqsa Hospital on Sunday citing increasing Israeli military activity in the area.

As Maynard and his team left Gaza for their safety, he fears that “there are not enough staff to run the hospital in any form at all now.”

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, head of the World Health Organization (WHO), warned Sunday that Al-Aqsa hospital was the “most important hospital remaining” in central Gaza. He demanded that medical staff and their families be protected, adding the facility “must remain functional.”

**‘An entire generation of orphans’**

Israel’s bombardment of Gaza began after Hamas launched its brutal October 7 assault in which some 1,200 people, mostly civilians were killed and more than 200 people taken hostage.

Since then, about [one out of every 100 people in Gaza has been killed,](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-population-intl/index.html) according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, which generates its data from hospitals in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

At least 23,084 Palestinians have been killed and 58,926 others injured in Gaza since October 7, the Hamas-run Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza said on Monday. The Ministry of Health in Ramallah said that more than 5,300 of the dead are women and more than 9,000 were children.

CNN is not able to independently verify numbers released by the two ministries.

A separate statistic released by the international organization Save the Children said more than 10 children on average have [lost one or both of their legs](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/middleeast/gaza-children-losing-legs-disease-intl-hnk/index.html) every day in Gaza since October.

Israel’s military campaign has sparked an international outcry with a growing number of nations backing calls for a ceasefire.

The United States has been pressuring Israeli officials in the last several weeks to do more to protect civilians and implement more strategic strikes but has so far resisted calls for a ceasefire.

As deaths continue to climb, the conflict in Gaza has created “an entire generation of orphans,” King Abdullah II of Jordan said in a speech on Monday.

“More children have died in Gaza than in all other conflicts around the world this past year,” Abdullah said according to the speech which was [carried on state media](https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=56020&lang=en&name=en_news). “Of those who have survived, many have lost one or both parents — an entire generation of orphans.”

Abdullah’s made his remarks during a visit to the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda’s capital, according to Jordan’s Petra news agency.

“How can indiscriminate aggression and shelling bring peace? How can they guarantee security, when they build on hatred?” Abdullah asked.

“Without a just peace, on the basis of the two-state solution, the world will continue to pay a heavy price for failing to resolve this conflict, and we will never know true peace and stability in the Middle East,” he warned.

The speech in Rwanda came after Abdullah of Jordan met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Amman on Sunday, where the two “agreed to continue close coordination for sustained humanitarian assistance” in Gaza, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Sunday.

Abdullah also warned Blinken of the “catastrophic consequences of the continuing war in Gaza,”

South Africa has filed an application at the International Court of Justice to begin proceedings over allegations of genocide against Israel for its war against Hamas in Gaza, the court said on Friday.

South Africa accuses Israel of being “in violation of its obligations under the Genocide Convention” in its application and argues that “acts and omissions by Israel … are genocidal in character, as they are committed with the requisite specific intent … to destroy Palestinians in Gaza,” according to the ICJ.

Over 21,507 people have been killed in Gaza since October 7, according to the enclave’s Hamas-controlled Health Ministry. Among the dead are at least 308 people who were sheltering in United Nations shelters, per the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees.

Israel has rejected South Africa’s claims and application to the world court, saying through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs that South Africa “is calling for the destruction of the State of Israel, and that its “claim lacks both a factual and a legal basis.”

“Israel is committed to international law and acts in accordance with it, and directs its military efforts only against the Hamas terrorist organization and the other terrorist organizations cooperating with Hamas,” its statement said, adding that it has made “every effort to limit harm to the non-involved and to allow humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip.”

Ad Feedback

Israel’s aerial bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza, in response to Hamas’ deadly terror attacks and kidnapping rampage on October 7, have caused widespread devastation in the densely-inhabited coastal strip, [prompting outcry from aid groups and the international community](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12/middleeast/ceasefire-vote-gaza-israel-un-intl/index.html).

US President Joe Biden [said](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12/politics/biden-israel-losing-support-netanyahu/index.html) earlier this month that that Israel is engaged in “indiscriminate bombing” in Gaza. US intelligence assessment suggests that nearly half of the air-to-ground munitions that Israel has used in Gaza in its [war with Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-13-23/index.html) have been unguided, otherwise known as “dumb bombs.” Unguided munitions are typically less precise and can pose a greater threat to civilians.

Many of the bombs used in Gaza have also been massive, capable of killing or wounding people more than 1,000 feet away, analysis by CNN and artificial intelligence company [Synthetaic](https://www.synthetaic.com/) has suggested.

Proponents of Israel’s campaign in Gaza argue that such heavy munitions act as bunker busters, helping to destroy Hamas’ underground tunnel infrastructure. However such bombs are normally used sparingly by Western militaries, experts say. International humanitarian law prohibits indiscriminate bombing.

South Africa’s application came as Israel’s military said Friday that it is [expanding its operations](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-29-23/h_2b51b080e5cefc6f4b519206fbfaeb64) in southern Gaza, where civilians were previously told to seek refuge. It also claimed to have destroyed a network of tunnels and one of the “hideout apartments” belonging to Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. CNN cannot independently verify the IDF’s claims.

“South Africa is gravely concerned with the plight of civilians caught in the present Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip due to the indiscriminate use of force and forcible removal of inhabitants,” a statement released by South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation said on Friday.

“Furthermore, there are ongoing reports of international crimes, such as crimes against humanity and war crimes, being committed as well as reports that acts meeting the threshold of genocide or related crimes as defined in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, have been and may still be committed in the context of the ongoing massacres in Gaza,” it says.

“As a State Party to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, South Africa is under a treaty obligation to prevent genocide from occurring.”

South Africa and Israel are both parties to the Genocide Convention, according to the ICJ, which is also known as the World Court and is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations.

Hamas has replied to a proposal aimed at the [release of the remaining hostages in Gaza and a sustained cessation in fighting](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/qatar-israel-hamas-hostage-talks-progress/index.html), Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced Tuesday.

“I would like to inform the media that we have received a reply from Hamas with regards to the general framework of the agreement with regard to hostages,” Al Thani said at a press conference alongside Blinken in Doha.

“The reply includes some comments, but in general it is positive. However, given the sensitivity of the circumstances, we will not tackle details,” Al Thani said.

“We are optimistic, and we have delivered the response to the Israeli party,” he said.

The United States is reviewing the response from Hamas “now,” Blinken said, adding that he would discuss it with Israeli government officials on Wednesday.

The framework of the proposal was agreed to by negotiators in Paris at the end of last month. CNN previously reported that it would call for a first phase of civilian hostage releases to take place over a six-week pause, with three Palestinian prisoners held by Israel released for each civilian hostage returned from Gaza. That ratio would be expected to go up for Israel Defense Forces soldiers and a longer pause is possible beyond the six weeks for the later phases.

Qatar, which serves as one of the key mediators in negotiations with Hamas, received the response from the group on Tuesday, and then relayed it to Blinken when he arrived in the Qatari capital that day, a source familiar told CNN. Blinken had arrived in Doha after Tuesday meetings in Egypt – another key interlocutor – and meetings Monday in Saudi Arabia.

After being told about Hamas’ proposal, Blinken’s response was positive, the source said.

A State Department official said Blinken was first informed about the Hamas counterproposal by the Qatari Emir, who told the top US diplomat that Hamas had responded an hour before the meeting. The Emir outlined it briefly and called it positive, and then the Qatari Prime Minister gave further details, the official told the traveling press. State Department officials briefed the White House.

President Joe Biden, who was briefed on the Hamas response, described it as “a little over the top” in remarks to the press later on Tuesday, but did not provide further details.

“We’re not sure where it is. There’s a continuing negotiation right now,” he said.

Officials close to the matter expected Hamas to reply with a counterproposal – rather than a straight rejection or acceptance – to the proposal given to them more than a week ago.

The source familiar described Hamas’ long-awaited counteroffer as “reasonable.” For a first phase, it does not include two of its most prominent and public demands: that Israeli soldiers leave Gaza or for a deal to end the war, the official said.

In a press statement Tuesday, Hamas said it “dealt with the proposal in a positive spirit, ensuring a comprehensive and complete ceasefire, ending the aggression against our people, ensuring relief, shelter, and reconstruction, lifting the siege on the Gaza Strip, and completing a prisoner exchange.” It did not offer specific details about its response.

Last week, senior Hamas leader Ismael Hanniyeh said in a statement that: “the review of the new proposal for a ceasefire is based on the basis that any negotiations lead to a complete end to the aggression.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office on Tuesday confirmed that Israel has received Hamas’ response. ”Hamas’s reply has been conveyed by the Qatari mediator to the Mossad,” the Prime Minister’s Office posted on X. “Its details are being thoroughly evaluated by the officials involved in the negotiations.”

The next hurdle is Israel’s response. Any push for a lasting ceasefire is likely to remain among the foremost sticking points in the longer-term negotiations, as Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive in Gaza until Hamas’ leaders have been killed and “complete victory” has been achieved.

“We will kill the Hamas leadership, therefore we must continue to act in all areas of the Gaza Strip. The war must not end before that. It will take time – months not years,” Netanyahu said Monday.

The sides have been unable to reach an agreement to release more hostages since one in November collapsed. That agreement resulted in a weeklong pause in fighting in exchange for the release of more than 100 hostages. Another deal to free the more than 100 who remain would be a major breakthrough at a time of huge tension in the Middle East as concerns grow about a wider regional conflict breaking out.

The top US diplomat on Tuesday reiterated that the proposal that was presented to Hamas was a “serious” one “that was aimed at not simply repeating the previous agreement, but expanding it.”

“There’s still a lot of work to be done, but we continue to believe that an agreement is possible, and indeed essential. And we will continue to work relentlessly to achieve it,” Blinken said at the news conference.

When human rights activist Ziv Stahl was awakened to the booms of rocket fire on October 7, while staying at her sister’s home in Kibbutz [Kfar Aza](https://cnn.com/2023/10/10/middleeast/israel-kibbutzim-kfar-aza-beeri-urim-hamas-attack-intl/index.html), she did not for a moment anticipate the scale of the terrorist attack unfolding around her. Nor did she imagine the horror she would feel when she later called the police, who “basically told me no one is coming.”

That day saw Hamas militants murder her sister-in-law and several prominent peace activists living in the kibbutz, one of the communities that bore the brunt of the attack on Israel.

Stahl, who is the executive director of the human rights organization Yesh Din, says she is not calling for revenge over what happened that day nor is she taking a pacifist position on Israel’s ensuing war in Gaza against Hamas. “I am not saying ceasefire at any cost,” she said. “Israel has a right to defend itself and protect Israeli citizens,” she explained, but not indiscriminately or at the cost of thousands of Palestinian lives.

Her position, which she described as “complicated,” speaks to the challenge Israel’s peace movement faces when coming to terms with the worst massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust.

Jewish Israelis who have spent their lives committed to co-existence with Palestinians have found themselves balancing worries about the cycle of violence churned by Israel’s war and the security needs of Israelis amid great personal loss.

Ad Feedback

As [Palestinian solidarity protests](https://cnn.com/2023/11/16/politics/protests-palestine-israel-biden-what-matters/index.html) take place throughout the West, some of Israel’s small group of leftists, peace activists and human rights advocates, like Stahl, have chosen to take a step back from the public debate on a permanent ceasefire. Others say finding an end to the war and forging a two-state solution is more urgent than ever, even if it may be an unpopular opinion in the country that over the decades has drifted rightward [politically.](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/israelpalestine/israels-winning-coalition)

Some activists complain that authorities are attempting to equate peace activism with support for Hamas. Anti-war protests have been near impossible to get permits for, except for one in Tel Aviv by the left-wing Arab and Jewish Hadash party. And in early November, [four high-profile](https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/10955) Palestinian political leaders in Israel were detained for taking part in an anti-war silent protest.

**The radical left**

At a left-wing community space in Tel Aviv, decorated with a red banner with the words “a nation that occupies another nation will never be free,” a group of young Israelis discuss their newly-formed anti-war group, which they have named “Gen Zayin,” which means Gen Z.

The group’s members have asked CNN to use pseudonyms for them, pointing to the dozens of people arrested since October 7 in Israel [for allegedly inciting](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/05/middleeast/palestinians-israel-fear-arrest-gaza-intl-cmd/index.html) violence and terrorism. Many of those arrested are Palestinian and activists say their arrests and detention are carried out without proper legal justification and simply for showing support for Palestinian people.

While in the West, young voters are often more liberal than their grandparents,’ the opposite is true in Israel, Rafael, one of Gen Zayin’s co-founders ﻿who is using a pseudonym, told CNN. A 2022 poll by the [Israeli Democracy Institute found](https://en.idi.org.il/articles/47344https:/en.idi.org.il/articles/47344) that 73% of Jewish people surveyed between the ages of 18 and 24 identified as right-wing compared with 46% of people polled over the age of 65.

The group’s anti-war position won’t be welcomed by most of the Jewish population at this current moment, they say, which is why Gen Zayin members stick up posters in the dead of night and surreptitiously share pamphlets that espouse their anti-war, anti-government manifesto in high schools.

Rafael, 24, passionately supports a two-state solution and [accuses](https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-years-netanyahu-propped-up-hamas-now-its-blown-up-in-our-faces/) the country’s right-wingers, like Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, of emboldening Hamaswith their attempt at repressing a Palestinian state. “The situation is unsustainable, and the only way that we can live in a just, equal, and democratic society is through peace, the end of occupation, eviction of the settlers” from the West Bank and the right of return of an estimated 5.9 million [Palestinian refugees](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/30/us/palestinian-refugees-gaza-war-cec/index.html) around the world, he said.

Gen Zayin members are fearful of Israeli public opinion but also feel abandoned by parts of the Western leftist movement, who they see as advocating for the abolition of the Israeli state. Rafael raged at an anti-war slogan he saw online: “Do you support decolonization as an abstract concept or a tangible event?” it read. That “tangible event” was in reference to Hamas’ attack, which killed 1,200 people in Israel and led to the outbreak of the war, he said.

“They don’t understand that 7 million Israelis are living here, and aren’t going anywhere, and a lot of Israelis don’t know that the 7 million Palestinians [in Israel and the territories] are not going anywhere either,” he said. “The only way forward is together.”

**Doxed and threatened**

Expressing public sympathy for Palestinians can land you in hot water. Some Jewish Israelis [have lost their jobs](https://www.brismes.ac.uk/news/letter-to-achva-academic-college-regarding-dismissal-of-dr-uri-horesh) or have been publicly sanctioned for speaking out in favour of Gaza, say activists. Ofer Cassif, a Hadash lawmaker in the Knesset, told CNN he was suspended in October for 45 days for saying “the Israeli government wanted confrontation.”

He was also accused of comparing Israel’s plan for Gaza to the Nazi Final Solution, he said. “That’s not what I said. But they didn’t really care because that committee was interested in political persecution, in political silencing of the opposition and dissident voices who raise a voice against the war,”

The left-wing, ultra-Orthodox journalist Israel Frey recounts how he was doxed and chased out of his home in Jerusalem on October 15 with his wife and two children by far-right football ultras. It was over a video of him saying the Kaddish, the Jewish mourner’s prayer, where he prayed for those slaughtered by Hamas and for Palestinian women and children under fire in Gaza.

“Little by little, the street was filling up. They arrived at my home. I tried to look (through) the viewfinder (in the door) and they closed it. Knocking, trying to hurt me. Two months later I talk about it with some amusement, but in real time it was very scary. Hundreds of people came (and) tried to hurt me,” he told CNN from an undisclosed location, as he is currently in hiding.

Riot police officers who came to usher him out of his apartment also tormented him, he said, with one spitting on him, he said. CNN has reached out to Yasam, the Israel Police Special Patrol Unit, for comment.

**Grieving families consider the future**

Over a hot cup of tea, filled with herbs he picked from the roof garden of a hostel he co-owns in Tel Aviv, Maoz Inon told CNN he became a peace activist a week after his parents were killed in the October 7 attack. In that moment, he realized that “peace is the only thing that can bring security to everyone living in between the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea,” he said.

He has not been sanctioned in the same way as other people in the peace movement, saying that it’s down to him being among the families affected by Hamas’ attack. **“**I’m using my privilege and 15 minutes of fame of being a victim in order to prevent others from becoming victims,”

Not many Jewish peace activists are ready to vocally advocate for peace “because everyone is traumatized – but I have the words,” Inon said.

Speaking from a suburban community near Jerusalem, just meters away from the Green Line with the occupied West Bank, Israeli American Elana Kaminka told CNN she used to buy vegetables from a small Palestinian village across the border. But everything changed after October 7, when her 20-year-old son Yannai was killed as he heroically defended Zikim training base near the border with Gaza, she said.

Since then, the metaphorical and physical walls have gone up around her stretch of the Green Line. The checkpoints have hardened and many Palestinians living in the West Bank, have seen permits for work in Israel revoked, say Kaminka, who has not visited the village since her son died.

If Israelis “really understood what was happening in the territories – the actual practical meaning of the occupation – I think their opinions would be different,” she told CNN from the home she shares with her husband and three other children. “And for Palestinians, also, it’s very easy to demonize Israelis and every Israeli soldier as a horrible person. It is super easy to live in a bubble where you don’t have any interaction with the other side.”

The grief she feels for the loss of her son is all encompassing. She has struggled to write or continue with her volunteer work, which includes supporting victims of racist violence and transporting unwell Palestinian children to Israeli hospitals.

Kaminka does not have a clear position on the war and, like Stahl, says there are huge security concerns at play, especially when more than 100 hostages remain in Gaza. What she is certain of is that, in the long-term, Jewish-Palestinian coexistence is the only way forward.

While pointing to the Palestinian village she used to visit, she said: “We have to find a way to build a common society that feels fair and feels just to as many people as possible.”

Israel on Friday rejected what it called the “grossly distorted” [accusation of genocide](https://cnn.com/2024/01/11/middleeast/south-africa-israel-genocide-icj-hague-day-one-intl/index.html) leveled against it by South Africa, telling the United Nations’ top court the case was an attempt to “pervert the meaning” of the term.

In the second and final day of hearings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Israel argued its war in Gaza was fought in self-defense, that it was targeting Hamas rather than Palestinians, and that its leadership had not displayed genocidal intent.

South Africa on Thursday had alleged Israel’s leadership was “intent on destroying the Palestinians as a group in Gaza,” and that its aerial and ground assaults on the enclave were intended to “bring about the destruction of its Palestinian population.”

Israel said the case was “a concerted and cynical effort to pervert the meaning of the term ‘genocide’ itself.” It asked the court, which sits in The Hague, the Netherlands, to dismiss the case as groundless and refuse South Africa’s request for the court to order a halt to the war.

In a statement issued after the second day of hearings at the ICJ, a German government spokesperson said that Germany “expressly rejects” allegations that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

Spokesperson Steffen Hebestreit said Germany acknowledges diverging views in the international community on Israel’s military operation in Gaza but said that “the German government decisively and expressly rejects the accusation of genocide brought against Israel before the International Court of Justice.”The ICJ was established in 1945 in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. It hears cases brought by states accusing others of violating their UN treaty obligations. South Africa and Israel are signatories to the 1948 Genocide Convention, meaning they are obliged not to commit genocide and to prevent and punish it.

In its opening remarks, Israel said it was [“singularly aware”](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-12-24/h_0e08b35d7a4a6368831e7acd5a43f9d7) of why the genocide convention was adopted. “Seared in our collective memory is the systematic murder of 6 million Jews, as part of a premeditated and heinous program for their total annihilation,” said Tal Becker, a lawyer representing Israel.

But Israel argued the convention was adopted only to “address a malevolent crime of the most exceptional circumstances,” and was “not designed to address the brutal impact of intensive hostilities” on civilians during warfare.

“We live in a time when words are cheap,” said Becker. “But if there is a place where words should still matter, where truth should still matter, it is surely a court of law.” He said South Africa’s case was an “attempt to weaponize the term ‘genocide’ against Israel.”

The UN defines genocide as an act “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” and [says](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml) the term was developed in response to the Nazis’ systematic murder of Jewish people during the Holocaust.

A final ruling on the case will take years, and this week’s hearings relate only to South Africa’s request for “provisional measures,” which act like a restraining order to stop a dispute from escalating while the court considers the full case based on its merits, which could take years.

For provisional measures the court need only decide if prima facie, or “at first glance,” the acts complained of – including Israel’s use of 2,000-pound bombs and its restriction of food and water to Gaza – could fall foul of the genocide convention. “It is necessary to establish only whether at least some of the acts alleged are capable of falling within the provisions of the convention,” South Africa argued Thursday.

South Africa has asked the court to order Israel to suspend its military campaign in Gaza. But even if the court does find it has prima facie jurisdiction, the provisional measures it decides would not necessarily be those requested by South Africa.

The ICJ has in the past granted similar requests. In January 2020, the court [granted](https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/178/178-20200123-PRE-01-00-EN.pdf) The Gambia’s request for provisional measures to protect the Rohingya people remaining in Myanmar from genocide. The court has granted similar measures to protect Ukrainians from ongoing Russian aggression, and to Bosnians during the Balkan Wars in the 1990s.

The court’s rulings are final and binding, but in practice ithas no way of enforcing them. A 2022 [report](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/14/developments-gambias-case-against-myanmar-international-court-justice#whataretheprov) by Human Rights Watch found continued abuses against the Rohingya remaining in Myanmar, despite the provisional measures. And, despite the court in March 2022 ordering Russia to immediately suspend its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow’s war rages nearly two years later.

**Genocidal acts ‘perpetrated against Israel’**

Israel said it felt “compelled” to share with the court a “fraction of the horror” meted out on Israeli civilians by Hamas during its murderous rampage, when more than 1,200 people were killed and 240 hostages were taken back to Gaza.

Becker, the lawyer, said Israel wanted to [share evidence](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-12-24/h_81208f0b1780cb26958cabefd43f356a) of Hamas’ atrocities “not because these acts, however sadistic and systematic, release Israel of its obligations to uphold the law as it defends its citizens and territory,” but because it was necessary to understand “the nature of the threat Israel is facing.”

Legal experts warned ahead of the trial that focusing excessively on Hamas’ October 7 attacks would not benefit Israel’s case because it would be beside the point. South Africa had stressed that “nothing can ever justify genocide, no matter what some individuals within the group of Palestinians in Gaza may have done.”

Nonetheless,Israel shared multimedia evidence of the “carnage and sadism” committed by Hamas militants and of the “genocidal intent” its leadership “proudly declared.” Hamas’ [founding charter](https://embassies.gov.il/holysee/AboutIsrael/the-middle-east/Pages/The%20Hamas-Covenant.aspx) mandates the killing of Jews and the destruction of Israel.

The court was shown a video of an interview shortly after October 7, in which Ghazi Hamad, a senior Hamas leader, told a Lebanese TV channel: “We will do this again and again.” He said the attack was “just the first time and there will be a second, a third, a fourth.”

“If there have been acts that may be characterized as genocidal, then they have been perpetrated against Israel,” said Becker.

**No ‘genocidal intent’**

Much of South Africa’s argument focused on the alleged genocidal intent of Israeli leadership, which it said was echoed in the actions of its military. Israel’s offensive in Gaza has killed more than 23,000 people since October 7, according to Palestinian officials.

South Africa cited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s [address to Israeli forces](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-28-oct-2023) on October 28, ahead of the imminent launch of its ground offensive in Gaza. “Remember what Amalek did to you,” Netanyahu said in his address, which South Africa said was a biblical reference to the divine command from God for the retaliatory destruction of the Amalekites.

Malcolm Shaw, representing Israel, said the language was merely “rhetorical” and pointed instead to other statements by Netanyahu, which he said “demonstrates the precise opposite of genocidal intent.”

“Any careful review of the official and binding policy decisions made by the relevant authorities in Israel clearly evidence that such decisions lack any genocidal intent. The contrary is true,” he said.

Israel stressed it was complying with international humanitarian law and attempting to minimize civilian casualties, despite Hamas’ embedding its military operations in buildings like schools and hospitals.

South Africa on Thursday said the evacuation order issued by Israel on October 13 to residents in northern Gaza was “genocidal,” since it “required immediate movement… while no humanitarian assistance was permitted.”

Israel said it was “astonishing” that “a measure intended to mitigate harm to the civilian population” had been taken by South Africa as proof of the country’s genocidal intent.

**‘Absurd’ provisional measures**

Israel concluded its hearing by asking the court to refuse South Africa’s request for provisional measures, since it said these would constrain Israel’s ability to defend itself while allowing Hamas to continue attacks.

If “resort to force in self-defense against an enemy hiding behind civilians can be portrayed as genocide and trigger provisional measures,” then “an inevitable tension will be created between the genocide convention and states defending themselves against the ever-increasing capacities of terrorist organizations,”

Christopher Staker, another of Israel’s lawyers, said provisional measures ought to be a “temporary shield” to preserve rights, but were in this case being used as “a sword to give an advantage to one party in a conflict over another.”

“It’s absurd to suggest that the only way to ensure observance of the genocide convention in a military operation is to prevent the operation from being conducted at all,” he said.

Staker also argued that, in ordering Israel to “desist” from committing genocidal acts, South Africa had implied that “violations of the convention by Israel are occurring” and so sought “an implied ruling on the merits” of the full case.

It could be days or weeks before the ICJ’s 15-judge panel – expanded by an additional judge from each side in this case – issues a decision on the emergency measures.

US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/07/politics/blinken-israel-middle-east-tensions/index.html) made clear to the Israeli government that Palestinians must be allowed to return to their homes in Gaza “as soon as conditions allow” and must not be displaced from the strip, the top US diplomat said Tuesday.

Blinken announced that the Israeli government had agreed to a plan to allow a United Nations assessment mission to northern Gaza as the Israeli offensive there shifts to a new phase.

“It will determine what needs to be done to allow displaced Palestinians to return safely to homes in the north,” Blinken said at a news conference in Tel Aviv.

In a day of talks with top Israeli officials, Blinken said he reaffirmed US support for Israel “ensuring that October 7 can never happen again,” while also calling on the government to do more to mitigate civilian casualties. He also discussed the efforts to secure the release of hostages who remain held by Hamas.

Blinken has made five visits to Israel since the October 7 Hamas attacks as the Biden administration sought to keep pressure on the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“It’s our unique bond and America’s enduring commitment to the people of Israel that allows, indeed demands, that we’re as forthright as possible in the moments when the stakes are highest, when the choices matter the most. This is one of those moments,” he Tuesday.

Indeed, the stakes of the secretary’s latest visit couldn’t be higher as [concerns mount over the war spilling out](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/04/politics/us-iran-proxies-middle-east-concerns/index.html) into the wider region and the humanitarian toll continues to grow. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in the Israeli offensive, millions have been displaced, and the entire population in the war-torn strip faces the risk of famine, the UN has warned. US officials have publicly acknowledged that gaps remain between Israel’s “intentions” and “results” when it comes to the staggering toll on civilians.

**‘Give the Israeli’s our best advice’**

Following Tuesday’s meetings, Blinken said the US would continue to “give the Israelis our best advice about conducting this war in a manner that achieves the objective of making sure that October 7 can’t be repeated, does better by protecting civilians and making sure that people get the assistance that they need.”

The US “believes Israel has achieved significant progress” toward ensuring that the Hamas terrorist attack cannot happen again, the top US diplomat said.

In his meetings, Blinken discussed the next phase of Israel’s war in Gaza, which Israeli officials said would be more targeted and involve fewer troops inside Gaza.

Blinken’s comments after the meetings suggest that there had been more discussion of the future for Gaza than in his past four visits.

In announcing the UN assessment mission, Blinken noted that it was just the beginning of the process to make a land now deemed by a UN official as “uninhabitable” livable again.

“This is not going to happen overnight. There are serious security, infrastructure and humanitarian challenges,” he said.

Blinken said that [Sigrid Kaag](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/27/middleeast/dutch-diplomat-humanitarian-aid-gaza-sigrid-kaag-intl/index.html), the UN’s new senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, “must have” Israel’s full support.

Beyond that, the Netanyahu government – one of the most far-right in history - must move toward a two-state solution if they want the help of their Arab partners in the region with lasting security moving forward, the top US diplomat said.

Blinken, who traveled to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar prior to his stop in Israel, told Netanyahu that “every partner that I met on this trip said that they’re ready to support a lasting solution that ends the long-running cycle of violence and ensures Israel’s security.”

“But they underscored that this can only come through a regional approach that includes a pathway to a Palestinian state,” Blinken said.

“If Israel wants its Arab neighbors to make the tough decisions necessary to help ensures lasting security, Israeli leaders will have to make hard decisions themselves,” he said.

**Rein in the far-right**

In some of his most direct comments on the matter, Blinken said Netanyahu must rein in the far-right tendencies of his government in order to achieve any progress in the future.

“Israel must stop taking steps that undercut Palestinians ability to govern themselves effectively. Extremist settler violence carried out with impunity, settlement expansion, demolitions, evictions all make it harder – not easier – for Israel to achieve lasting peace and security,” he said.

Blinken also said that the Palestinian Authority “has a responsibility to reform itself, to improve its governance.” Blinken will meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank on Wednesday.

The top US diplomat again rebuked the comments of far-right members of the Israeli government who had called for Gazans to be relocated outside of the strip, and said that Netanyahu “reaffirmed to me today that this is not the policy of Israel’s government.”

On fears of escalation to the north, Blinken claimed that neither the US nor Israel wants to see that happen. He arrived just hours after news emerged that a senior Hezbollah commander had been killed in an Israeli strike in Lebanon – the second such strike by Israeli forces since the start of the year.

“As I told the war cabinet and other senior officials, the United States stands with Israel in ensuring its northern border is secure,” Blinken said Tuesday. “We’re fully committed to working with Israel to find a diplomatic solution that avoids escalation and allows families to return to their homes to live securely in northern Israel, and also in southern Lebanon.”

In the first month of its war in Gaza, Israel dropped hundreds of massive bombs, many of them capable of killing or wounding people more than 1,000 feet away, analysis by CNN and artificial intelligence company [Synthetaic](https://www.synthetaic.com/) suggests.

Satellite imagery from those early days of the war reveals more than 500 impact craters over 12 meters (40 feet) in diameter, consistent with those left behind by 2,000-pound bombs. Those are four times heavier than the vast majority of the largest bombs the United States dropped on ISIS during the war against the extremist group in Syria and Iraq.

Weapons and warfare experts blame the extensive use of heavy munitions such as the 2,000-pound bomb for the soaring death toll. The population of Gaza is packed together much more tightly than almost anywhere else on earth, so the use of such heavy munitions has a profound effect.

“The use of 2,000-pound bombs in an area as densely populated as Gaza means it will take decades for communities to recover,” said John Chappell, advocacy and legal fellow at CIVIC, a DC-based group focused on minimizing civilian harm in conflict.

Israel has come under pressure internationally over the scale of the devastation in Gaza, with even staunch ally US President Joe Biden accusing Israel of “indiscriminate bombing” of the coastal strip.

Israeli officials have argued that its heavy munitions are necessary to eliminating Hamas, whose fighters killed more than 1,200 people and took more than 240 hostages on October 7. They also claim that Israel is doing all it can to minimize civilian casualties.

“In response to Hamas’ barbaric attacks, the IDF is operating to dismantle Hamas’ military and administrative capabilities,” the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said in a statement in response to CNN’s reporting. “In stark contrast to Hamas’ intentional attacks on Israeli men, women and children, the IDF follows international law and takes feasible precautions to mitigate civilian harm.”

Hamas relies on a sprawling tunnel network that is believed to crisscross the Gaza Strip. Proponents of Israel’s campaign in Gaza argue that the heavy munitions act as bunker busters, helping to destroy Hamas’ underground infrastructure.

But 2,000-pound bombs are normally used sparingly by Western militaries, experts say, because of their potential impact on densely populated areas like Gaza. International humanitarian law prohibits indiscriminate bombing.

Marc Garlasco a former US defense intelligence analyst and former UN war crimes investigator, said the density of Israel’s first month of bombardment in Gaza had “not been seen since Vietnam.”

Garlasco, now a military adviser at PAX, a Dutch non-governmental organization that advocates for peace, reviewed all the incidents analyzed in this report for CNN.

“You’d have to go back to the Vietnam war to make a comparison,” said Garlasco. “Even in both Iraq wars it was never that dense.”

The heavy munitions, mostly manufactured by the US, can cause high casualty events and can have a lethal fragmentation radius – an area of exposure to injury or death around the target – of up to 365 meters (about 1,198 feet), or the equivalent of 58 soccer fields in area.

Weapons and warfare experts blame the extensive use of heavy weaponry, such as the 2,000-pound bomb for the soaring death toll. According to authorities in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, about 20,000 people have been killed since October 7.

Most of the dead are women and children, according to those figures.

CNN partnered with US AI company Synthetaic which used Rapid Automatic Image Categorization (RAIC) to detect craters, smoke plumes and damaged buildings in tasked satellite imagery over the Gaza Strip. The findings were manually reviewed by a member of Synthetaic, as well as by CNN journalists.

CNN and Synthetaic’s findings “reveal and emphasize the sheer intensity of the bombardment over a very short period of time,” according to Annie Shiel, US advocacy director at CIVIC.

**A high-intensity offensive**

For over two months, Israel has conducted a high-intensity war in Gaza, combining heavy aerial bombardment with relentless rounds of artillery fire, as well as a ground invasion that began on October 27.

The operation has wrought devastation that stretches across swathes of the besieged enclave, satellite imagery and video show.

“In two months, we’ve had about the level of strikes in this tiny little area in Gaza as what we saw in Mosul and Raqqa combined,” said Larry Lewis, research director at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) and formerly the US State Department’s senior adviser on civilian harm, referring to US-led coalition operations against two ISIS strongholds. “It is an incredible amount of strikes, period-wise.”

On November 6 – the final day of CNN and Synthetaic’s dataset – the death toll in Gaza surpassed 10,000 people, according to the Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah, citing authorities in Hamas-controlled Gaza.

Later that week, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf – the most senior American diplomat on the Middle East – said the death toll could be “even higher.”

“In this period of conflict and the conditions of war, it is very difficult for any of us to assess what the rate of casualties are,” said Leaf during a hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. “We think they’re very high, frankly. It could be even higher than are being cited.”

Last week, [US intelligence sources told CNN that 40-45%](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/middleeast/maps-population-density-gaza-israel-dg/index.html) of the 29,000 air-to-surface munitions dropped on Gaza by then were so-called dumb bombs, unguided  munitions that can pose a greater threat to civilians, especially in densely populated territories like Gaza.

Some of these are likely to be the 2,000-pound bombs detected in the satellite imaging of the craters. Israel has a large arsenal of the big bombs, known as MK-84s. When a GPS-guided kit is attached to the MK-84, the bomb becomes known as a GBU-31.

According to two people familiar with the matter, the US has provided Israel with more than 5,400 MK-84s since October 7.

“The devastation that we’ve seen for communities in Gaza is unfortunately, co-signed by the United States,” said CIVIC’s Chappell. “Too much of it is carried out by bombs that were made in the United States.”

**Extensive big bomb attacks around Gaza City**

The 2,000-pound bombs feature prominently in attacks on the perimeter of Gaza City, the epicenter of the Israeli military operation in October and much of November.

Israel’s ground forces eventually laid siege to the city in early November. The bombing pattern seen in the satellite images suggests that the heavy bombardment around Gaza City may have paved a path to its encirclement by Israeli troops.

In northern Gaza’s Jabalya refugee camp, satellite images showed two large craters consistent with Israel’s October 31 bombing, decried by the UN as a “disproportionate attack that could amount to war crimes.” It claimed over 100 lives, according to civilian harm watchdog Airwars, and caused catastrophic damage in the densely populated area.

One Al Jazeera employee lost 19 members of his family in the bombing, which Israel claimed targeted Hamas commander Ibrahim Biari, killing him and destroying his base.

The two craters left behind by the attack, which experts described as “earthquake-like” in its impact, were 24 meters (nearly 79 feet) wide and 13 meters (nearly 43 feet) wide respectively, according to satellite imagery.

Former State Department adviser Lewis said the October 31 Jabalya strike was “something we would never see the US doing.”

“It certainly appears that (Israel’s) tolerance for civilian harm compared to expected operational benefits is significantly different than what we would accept as the US,” Lewis said.

A large crater consistent with a 2,000-pound bomb is seen on the coastal highway that runs through the Al Shati’, or Beach camp. In a neighborhood just north of the camp, 14 craters indicating 2,000-pound bombs appear in one square kilometer.

The Beach camp is one of the first areas in Gaza where Israeli ground troops established a firm foothold. Satellite images of the refugee camp from November 6 showed it to have been all but leveled by bombardment.

“Suddenly, we heard two airstrikes. It was loud. It felt like an earthquake. We saw stones flying everywhere,” said one man to a CNN stringer in the immediate aftermath of an apparent large bomb attack on the Beach camp on November 6. “We came here to see 10 houses struck.”

**The lethal fragmentation zone**

The 2,000-pound bomb’s large 365-meter (about 1,198-ft) lethal fragmentation radius is evident in many videos reviewed by CNN, where several buildings are seen to have been flattened in a single strike.

On October 24, Israel struck a location less than 100 meters (about 328 ft) away from Wafa Hospital. In an interview with al-Jazeera almost immediately after the strike, the hospital’s director, Fouad Najm, said the attack had “terrified the patients and medics.” The hospital has since gone out of service because of sustained nearby strikes and fuel outages.

It is unclear whether the October 24 blast caused significant damage to the hospital.

CNN geolocated video of the blast and matched it to 12-meter and 15-meter craters, consistent with 2,000-pound bombs, in satellite imagery.

“Clearly the hospital is within the lethal fragmentation range of a 2,000-pound bomb. It would likely have caused damage,” said PAX’s Garlasco.

In one area near Beach camp, seven schools were within the lethal fragmentation zone of at least five craters. Satellite imagery captured on November 6 showed wide-scale destruction in the area. Those satellite images also showed Israeli armored vehicles in and around the schools.

“When you use a weapon so close to a civilian building, it is impossible to remove the chance of damage from the weapon. It is going to get hit by something,” said Garlasco.

On the sixth day of its offensive, the Israeli Air Force said in a tweet that it had dropped 6,000 munitions since the start of the war, averaging 1,000 bombs a day.Tal and Zak have no idea how long they’ll be deployed in what the Israelis call “the Gaza envelope,” the area in southern Israel that was attacked by [Hamas terrorists](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-21-23/index.html) two weeks ago.

It could be weeks, it could be months, they said. “It’s the same for everyone. No one knows,” Zak told CNN at a military camp not far from the [Gaza border](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/17/middleeast/rafah-border-crossing-gaza-israel-explained-intl/index.html). The two young soldiers, whose surnames CNN isn’t revealing for security reasons, serve in an artillery unit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) that was moved into the area after Hamas militants killed 1,400 people and [kidnapped about 200](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/hamas-us-hostages-released-intl/index.html) on October 7.

Their unit is part of a massive buildup of Israeli troops and military material on the Gaza border. On top of its regular force, the IDF has also called up 300,000 reservists who reported to their bases within hours. Across Israel, highways in the vicinity of major bases are lined with thousands and thousands of cars, abandoned by reservists rushing to take up arms.

A ground incursion by Israel into Gaza now seems inevitable. On Thursday, the Israeli Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, told troops gathered near the border that they would “soon see” the enclave “from the inside” and said Gaza will “never be the same.” He later pledged that the expected incursion will be the “last manoeuvring inside Gaza… due to the simple reason that Hamas will cease to exist. It might take a month, two… but eventually there will be no Hamas.”

But what that operation might look like remains unknown. The IDF could launch a full-scale invasion, or conduct more precise incursions aimed at recovering the hostages and targeting Hamas operatives.

Ad Feedback

The hostage situation could complicate any potential incursion into Gaza. According to two sources briefed on the discussions, the United States has pressed Israel to [delay its invasion](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-22-23/h_57280dc3a893af2eb8dff3de6e9f4c62) to allow for the release of more hostages. The release on Friday of [two Americans held by Hamas](https://cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/hamas-us-hostages-released-intl/index.html) signaled the possibility of freeing more hostages, but Israel has not indicated it is considering a ceasefire.

What will happen after that is an even bigger question. While the Israeli leadership speaks about the need to get rid of Hamas, the plan for the future of Gaza and its more than 2 million people people remains unknown.

“There is a consensus that any other option than to totally eliminate Hamas would be terrible, not just for Israel, but for the entire area, and then even globally,” said Harel Chorev, senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at the Tel Aviv University.

“What it means is basically to destroy the infrastructure there, the city under the city – what we call the Gaza City Metro,” Chorev told CNN, referring to the [vast labyrinth of tunnels](https://cnn.com/2023/10/15/middleeast/hamas-tunnels-gaza-intl/index.html) used to transport people and goods, store rockets and ammunition and house Hamas command and control centers. “It means breaking their backbone through any measure, and, of course, destroying the leadership, in Gaza and elsewhere,”

But Hasan Alhasan, a research fellow for Middle East Policy at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said the plan to annihilate Hamas could be dangerous and complicated – and may have unforeseen consequences.

“Because Hamas is deeply rooted and embedded within Gaza, its society and geography, in order to defeat them, Israel would have to carry out permanent topographic and demographic change of the Gaza Strip – and that has already been happening,” he told CNN.

**Humanitarian disaster**

The IDF has told all civilians in north Gaza to evacuate to the south as it continues pounding the enclave with airstrikes. That order has created a humanitarian disaster of epic proportions.

The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said on Saturday that about 1.4 million people had been displaced in Gaza – more than 60% of the entire strip’s population. Gaza has been under blockade by Israel and Egypt for years, but after the Hamas attack, Israel also cut off its electricity, food, water and fuel supplies.

Israel said it restored water supply on October 15, but without electricity to run pumping station, water authorities in Gaza say they cannot even tell if water has been restored, let alone pump it.

“The concern, within Egypt especially, is that Israel’s strategy of making the humanitarian situation very difficult in Gaza is ultimately meant to force a mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza into the Egyptian Sinai,” Alhasan said, adding that Egypt has the backing of all of the Arab states in that it would not allow this.

“The Jordanians are also concerned that if we see a mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza, that this would create a precedent and that Israel’s right wing government would attempt to solve the Palestinian issue once and for all by expelling them en masse from Gaza into Egypt and from the West Bank into Jordan,” he added.

Israel has so far maintained it is waging a war on Hamas, not the civilians of Gaza. But a spokesman for the IDF told CNN on Saturday that while they try to avoid civilian casualties, they are inevitable in urban warfare.

Lt. Col. Peter Lerner told CNN’s Lynda Kinkade with “the prospect of ground operation,” the IDF remained focused on defeating Hamas. “It is our role to make sure Hamas can never hold the power of government, of terrorism, that they did,” he said

**The most just war’**

The huge military buildup around the Gaza Strip border is clearly visible – as is the high morale among the troops. Just down the road from the camp where Tal and Zak are staying, volunteers from across Israel have set up a makeshift pit stop for the soldiers passing by, serving food and handing out soft drinks, religious items, cigarettes and – most importantly, according to some of the soldiers – good coffee.

Rabbi Yitzhak, a military rabbi, has been traveling around the Gaza border, visiting troops and offering his encouragement.

“I am here to make the soldiers stronger, so they can focus on their job… as time goes by, they can get tired, I want to make sure they know we love them and appreciate them. They are nervous, but they are strong,” he said, adding that his main purpose is to boost the soldiers’ morale so that they can “finish the job.”

Not that he needs to do much. The brutality of the terror attack by Hamas has shaken Israel to its core and the large number of its victims has made it personal to most.

“I don’t think there’s one person in this country who doesn’t know someone who was killed,” Tal, the artillery unit soldier, told CNN.

One young reservist, who was called back just a year after finishing his compulsory military service, said the war Israel was waging on Hamas was “the most just war one can imagine.”

“There is nothing more just than this – they murdered innocent civilians. That’s why we are here,” he said, asking for his name to remain private as he is not officially allowed to speak to media.

He and the other young men he served with have been reunited near the Gaza border, training for what’s to come next – whatever that may be. “We are ready, but we hope it will end soon,” he added.

**Tight grip**

What is clear is that for people in Gaza, it will not end soon. What happens to them after the operation ends is anyone’s guess. Most Israeli politicians have remained vague on their plans for the enclave, hinting it could look more like the West Bank in the future.

Hamas, an Islamist organization with a military wing, has been in control of Gaza since it won a landslide victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections – the last vote to be held in Gaza – and then violently expelled Fatah, the faction that makes up the backbone of the Palestinian Authority, in 2007.

Unlike some other Palestinian factions, Hamas refuses to engage with Israel. It is also in a political war with the Palestinian Authority, which governs the West Bank and engages in security coordination and talks with Israel.

Hamas has been designated a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union and Israel, but it also runs religious and social welfare programs in Gaza, which is partially how it maintains a tight grip on the population.

So if Israel succeeds in removing Hamas, it will need to replace the group with an alternative government.

Avi Dichter, a former head of the Israeli Security agency, or Shin Bet, and the current minister of agriculture, said that what Israel wants to achieve in Gaza is the same level of security control it currently has in the West Bank, where it maintains complete access on its own terms.

“Today, whenever we have a military problem in every single place in the West Bank. We are there,” Dichter told CNN. “Remember in Gaza there is no administration, it has to be built - another administration,” Dichter said.

Harel Chorev, the Middle East expert, told CNN that the only way to rebuild Gaza is by implementing a long-term plan, something like the Marshal Plan that helped rebuild the economy in post-war Europe with the goal of containing the spread of Communism.

“It will be a post-Second World War like situation in the Gaza Strip in terms of destruction, so it will need to be taken care of,” he said. He said he believed there would be international cooperation on the rebuilding of Gaza, because international aid worth tens of millions of dollars has been flowing into the enclave for years – but much of it has been misused by Hamas, he said.

“You have to understand how much damage is inflicted on all of the Palestinians by Hamas. I was talking to a PalestinianAuthorityofficial and their message is clear: ‘destroy them, destroy them, this time, Israel must destroy Hamas, otherwise we’re done,’” he said. “Of course, publicly, they condemn Israel,” he added.

The Palestinian Authority is controlled by Fatah, Hamas’ political rival.

However, Alhasan said securing international help could be difficult if Israel proceeds with its plan to invade Gaza.

“I think it would be very difficult to secure cooperation from the Arab states on the post-Israeli incursion-scenario, because they weren’t on board with it from the get go … I think it will hinge on whether Israel goes for a total annexation of Gaza, or whether it opts for for something else,” he said.

He said the biggest risk is that Israel’s heavy-handed approach – which could lead to a high number of civilian casualties – will only lead to Hamas being replaced by another extremist group.

“This is what militant groups do. They provoke an overreaction, and that overreaction helps further radicalization, and essentially allows them to continue recruiting people to continue to receive support because the further down we go the path of violence, the more it seems that the only answer is violence,” he said.

The IDF campaign has so far left more than 4,000 people in Gaza dead.

“I think this is why the mass expulsion scenario becomes suddenly not inconceivable in Israel, if the objective is to eliminate Hamas, but also to prevent Hamas from regenerating or some other potentially even more radical group from emerging,” Alhasan added.

But Chorev said an international effort to rebuild Gaza economically could break this cycle of violence. “If all that international money that was invested into the (Hamas) projects could go to education, to welfare, to industry… you know, there are great people there (in Gaza) and the prospects would be better,” he said.

As they help their unit fire more missiles towards Gaza, with the goal of taking out Hamas targets one by one, Tal and Zak are not thinking about the future, not beyond the next day or so.

In fact, Zak told CNN, they try not to think much at all.

“We try hard not to have off times. Because if you don’t do anything, you**r** mind goes to places you don’t want to be. All of the friends we’ve lost, the family, many of us lost their close relatives and friends, some even their boyfriends and girlfriends,”

The Israeli military has completely encircled Gaza City, according to a spokesperson, as the United Nations’ main relief agency in the isolated enclave accused Israeli warplanes of lethally bombing UN-run schools sheltering civilians.

Nearly a week after Israel first began moving tanks, bulldozers, infantrymen and combat engineer units into Gaza, Israel Defense Force spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Thursday that Gaza City has been surrounded. The IDF’s engineering corps is working to locate and neutralize underground infrastructure, explosives and other threats so that troops can move freely, he said.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency meanwhile highlighted the civilian toll of the ongoing conflict, after agency chief Philippe Lazzarini announced that Israeli warplanes had hit several UN-run schools that had been sheltering civilians. More than 20 people were reportedly killed in the attacks, he said.

“Over the last few hours, I received reports that three of our schools sheltering about 20,000 people have been hit. This reportedly has led to the deaths of more than 20 people in Jabalya, and also one person at the beach camp,” he said. An UNRWA statement later said a fourth school-turned-shelter had been hit. CNN has asked the Israel Defense Force (IDF) for comment.

Chaos of the aftermath could be seen in a five-minute video posted to Telegram, which showed bloodied bodies strewn across the floor and people screaming at the UNRWA-sponsored Jabalya Elementary school.

The agency’s fuel stocks – crucial for moving aid and powering medical services – are also “completely completed” after weeks of an Israeli blockade on essential supplies entering Gaza, Lazzarini also said. UN independent experts have previously warned that the import blockade, which prevents fuel, water and food from entering in sufficient quantities, likely violates international law.

As the Gaza war nears its fifth month, with more than 25,000 Palestinians - civilians and combatants - dead and Israel nowhere close to achieving its objective of destroyingHamas, no one seems to have come up with a concrete proposal that’s palatable to both parties to pause the conflict, let alone end it. But there are suggestions, however half-baked, from both sides, that show a willingness to talk.

Indeed, Qatar - the main go-between - says there are “[serious discussions](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-23-24/h_d384ef1fcfd1e795749972d4aad34782)” with Israel and Hamas, and is receiving “constant replies” from both sides. They’re not “[negotiations](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-23-24/h_67ae66958777770cd7bcab7d4f5ac88f)” yet, says the White House. But with indirect talks ongoing, we seem to be inching towards what Ofer Shelah, Senior Researcher with Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), describes as a “Zopa” - a zone of possible agreement.

On Monday [Axios](https://www.axios.com/2024/01/22/israel-hamas-gaza-ceasefire-hostages) reported Israel had proposed a two-month truce in exchange for the release of all the 100-plus hostages still held in Gaza. Later that day CNN learned that Mossad chief David Barnea had suggested allowing Hamas leaders to [go into exile](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/22/politics/israel-proposal-hamas-leaders-leave-gaza/index.html) as part of a broader ceasefire. On Tuesday, [*The Wall Street Journal*](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-open-to-releasing-some-israeli-hostages-for-pause-in-fighting-mediators-say-81988681?mod=hp_lead_pos9) said Hamas was now open to releasing some of the hostages in exchange for a pause in the fighting. And [Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/one-month-gaza-truce-focus-intensive-talks-sources-say-2024-01-23/) reported that Israel and Hamas had agreed in principle to a one-month truce, during which abductees would be freed and Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails released.

The sticking point there appears to be that Hamas wants a “package deal” which would include a second-phase agreement to end the war. But even if Israel were to okay this, it’s unlikely to feel compelled to keep its word. “I don’t think even [Hamas leader Yahya] Sinwar is under the impression that any hostage deal would in fact end the Israel-Hamas conflict,” Shelah tells CNN. “Either they don’t want to do a deal,” he says, or it’s just posturing for domestic consumption.

So how about exile? For now, at least, that seems a non-starter. Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani [reportedly](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/22/politics/israel-proposal-hamas-leaders-leave-gaza/index.html) told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that it “would never work.” Hamas leaders, it’s understood, would rather go down fighting in Gaza. They know living abroad wouldn’t stop them being knocked off by the [Mossad](https://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/02/28/uae.murder.probe/index.html). Unlike PLO founder Yasser Arafat, who went from [exile in Beirut to exile in Tunis](https://www.nytimes.com/1982/08/31/world/arafat-sails-away-as-syrian-troops-leave-west-beirut.html), Gaza is *home* to Hamas’ senior leadership. Moreover, even Israel doesn’t seem overly keen. “The exile of Sinwar is not Israel’s position and has not been offered by Israel,” a senior Israeli government official told me.

And while emissaries are talking, and the IDF and Hamas are fighting, pressure on the Israeli government to bring the hostages home is growing. Over the weekend, protesters [camped](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2024/01/22/exp-netanyahu-two-state-solution-barak-ravid-intv-012212aseg1-cnni-world.cnn) outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s home to demand a deal to bring them home. “Right now someone is being raped in a tunnel,” former hostage Aviva Siegel [told the Knesset](https://www.timesofisrael.com/right-now-someone-is-being-raped-in-a-tunnel-knesset-hears-of-hamas-sex-crimes/) on Tuesday. On Wednesday, they held a day of action, blocking roads. On Thursday, they blocked humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza. It also emerged that Netanyahu had taken to [blaming](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-says-netanyahus-reported-criticism-undermines-gaza-mediation-2024-01-24/) Qatar for slow progress in getting the hostages freed - prompting a rebuke from the emirate’s foreign ministry.

An all-for-all deal is another option that’s been mooted since October 7. In other words, freeing [all Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-01-25/ty-article-opinion/.premium/q-a-on-israel-hamas-hostage-release-process-sinwar-is-happy-to-die-to-free-prisoners/0000018d-40ab-d35c-a39f-eafb67aa0000) - including those whom Israel says haveblood on their hands - in exchange for freeing all the hostages. But even if such a scenario were on the table, a [survey](https://en.idi.org.il/articles/52496) published by the Israel Democracy Institute on Wednesday found more than half of Israelis would be against it.

For now, though, such talk remains moot, with an Israeli official telling CNN there’s [no concrete deal](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-b-01-24-24/h_feb3effccc92eb28843d2c7d62fdcf48) on the table. Pummeling Hamas, says former IDF General Israel Ziv, ought to help. “There is no doubt there’s not a single Israeli who doesn’t want the hostages home,” he tells CNN. “But at the same time we can’t gamble on the future of Israel [by leaving Hamas in control of Gaza]. And to have both we need to apply the most military pressure in order to get the maximum position in negotiations.”

Ziv reckons it will take up to a month longer for the IDF to crush Hamas brigades in Khan Younis, in southern Gaza, where intense fighting has been taking place; an UNRWA shelter there was [struck](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/24/middleeast/khan-younis-gaza-un-shelter-strike-intl/index.html) on Wednesday, killing at least a dozen displaced Palestinians. Any deal Israel is looking to seal, says Ziv, would be more likely to come into effect once the Khan Younis operation is complete.

Of course, the endgame in Gaza isn’t only subject to military considerations, hostage families demanding a deal, or even pressure from the United States to wind things down. There’s also politics. The latest polls [spell disaster](https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-1069268) for the career of Israel’s longest-serving leader. One recent survey found more than half of all Israelis believe Netanyahu’s war policies are born of [self-interest](https://13tv.co.il/item/news/politics/politics/survey-903902650/?pid=7&cid=902992383). Gadi Eisenkot, a former chief of staff who sits in the war cabinet and [whose own son was recently killed in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/07/middleeast/israel-idf-war-cabinet-son-killed-gaza-intl/index.html), says he doesn’t believe that’s the case, but he does say that [destroying Hamas is unrealistic](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/19/middleeast/eisenkot-netanyahu-israel-war-politics-gaza-intl/index.html).

With that in mind, this round of the Israel-Hamas war probably won’t be the last. “Israel should agree to almost any kind of deal that brings the hostages home,” says the INSS’s Shelah. “Because it won’t be the end of the war anyway.”

Israel has proposed that Hamas senior leaders could leave Gaza as part of a broader ceasefire agreement, two officials familiar with the ongoing international discussions told CNN.

The extraordinary proposal, which has not been previously reported, comes as Israel has struggled to achieve its stated goal of completely [destroying Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/07/europe/israel-hamas-gaza-new-phase-war-intl/index.html). Despite its nearly [four-month war in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-12-23/index.html), Israel has failed to capture or kill any of Hamas’s most senior leaders in Gaza and left around 70% of Hamas’ fighting force intact, according to Israel’s own estimates.

Though it would give safe passage out of Gaza for top Hamas leaders who orchestrated the [October 7 attack](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/kibbutz-beeri-israel-war-intl-cmd/index.html), draining Gaza of its leaders could weaken Hamas’ grip on the war-torn area while also allowing Israel to continue tracking down high-value targets abroad.

Senior Hamas officials are known to live in Doha, Qatar, and the Lebanese capital Beirut, among other places outside the Palestinian territories. An [Israeli airstrike](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/02/middleeast/beirut-lebanon-hamas-official-killed-intl/index.html) earlier this month killed a top Hamas commander in Beirut.

Israel’s suggestion that Hamas leaders could leave Gaza, though unlikely to be accepted by Hamas, has been discussed as part of broader ceasefire negotiations at least twice in recent weeks — once last month in Warsaw by Israel’s intelligence chief, Mossad Director David Barnea, and then again this month in Doha with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, according to one official familiar with the discussions.

It also comes amid a flurry of diplomatic activity to try to achieve an extended break in the fighting and free hostages believed to still be alive in Gaza. The White House’s top official for the Middle East, Brett McGurk, is traveling to Egypt and Qatar this week for further talks.

American and international officials familiar with the negotiations have said that Israel and Hamas’ recent engagement in talks is encouraging but that a deal doesn’t appear imminent.

**Pressure on Netanyahu**

Pressure is building on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to deliver some kind of resolution. The “complete victory” over Hamas that he has called for is a long way off, by his own admission. Meanwhile, anger among Israelis has grown over the inability of the government to bring home the more than 100 hostages being held in Gaza.

Israel is “not achieving their military objectives,” says Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. That, combined with the “enormous pressure” on Netanyahu and his government to bring hostages home, Miller said, has created a situation where Israel would be willing to propose having Hamas leaders leave Gaza.

“I think they’re simply bumping up against against reality,” said Miller. “And hostage families are beginning to exert tremendous influence.”

In addition, international sentiment toward Israel has soured over its continued bombardment of Gaza, which has killed more than 25,000 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry.

For the past two months, the Biden administration has been openly calling on Israel to transition to a lower-intensity phase of the conflict, which US officials argue has started happening, though intense operations continue in southern Gaza.

**Proposal ‘would never work’**

The proposal for Hamas leaders to leave Gaza was raised in Warsaw in December by Barnea, Israel’s top intelligence official when he met with US CIA Director Bill Burns and Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Thani, who has acted as an intermediary with Hamas. The official familiar with the discussions in the meetings said it was then brought up again when Blinken was in the Qatari capital earlier this month.

In that meeting Blinken was told by al Thani that the Israeli idea “would never work,” the official said. In part because of distrust by Hamas that Israel would in fact end its operations against Hamas in Gaza even after its leadership left.

A second official, from the Middle East, was told about Israel’s proposal by the US.

The US State Department, CIA and the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office all declined to comment.

While it’s unclear whether in private discussions Israel has named which Hamas leaders they would hope to leave Gaza, there is no bigger target than [Yahya Sinwar](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/07/middleeast/yahya-sinwar-profile-intl/index.html), Hamas’ top official in Gaza. Sinwar is a “dead man walking,” Netanyahu and others have said.

Sinwar spent two decades in Israeli prisons and is originally from Khan Younis in southern Gaza, where the bulk of Israel’s operations in Gaza are currently focused. Israeli and US officials have said they believe Sinwar could be hiding out in the vast, deep network of tunnels under the city, Gaza’s second biggest.

His closest confidantes and aides are Mohammed Deif, the leader of Hamas’ armed wing, along with Deif’s deputy Marwan Issa. Sinwar’s brother Mohammed is also a senior Hamas commander. None are believed to have been found or killed by Israel.

Last month Israel [dropped](https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-778002) leaflets on Gaza offering rewards of hundreds of thousands of dollars for information on the Hamas leaders, including a $400,000 reward for information on Sinwar.

“The goal is bringing down Hamas as the ruler in the Gaza Strip,” said Ofer Shelah, a senior researcher at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies.

“There is no difference if [Sinwar] dies, or if he leaves,” Shelah said. “If he dies, then somebody could take over much in the same way. If we bring all the hostages back and Sinwar leaves, definitely that would make most people in Israel feel that we’ve won the war.”

American officials believe it is highly unlikely Sinwar and those around him would agree to leave Gaza, preferring instead to die fighting their sworn enemy.

**Israel vows to hunt Hamas globally**

Israel has made no secret of its intention to continue hunting Hamas leaders long after the war is over.

Netanyahu [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-ive-told-mossad-to-act-against-the-heads-of-hamas-wherever-they-are/) in November he had “instructed the Mossad to act against the heads of Hamas wherever they are.” Ronen Bar, the director of Israel’s domestic security agency Shin Bet, has vowed to “eliminate Hamas” around the world, even if it takes years.

“Everywhere: in Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Qatar, everywhere,” Bar said in a recording aired in early December by Israel’s public broadcaster, Kan.

Sinwar could perhaps be convinced to leave, Miller argued, if Israel were to agree to an “asymmetrical” trade of many times more Palestinian prisoners held by Israel than Israeli hostages.

“I think he would only consider it in the event the Israelis also agreed to free all of the Palestinian prisoners,” Miller said.

“Whatever the Israelis agree to, Sinwar must know that they’re going to try to kill him,” he added. “Weeks, months years.”

World events in recent years have brought large numbers of civilians seeking safety to America’s doorstep, from war in [Ukraine](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/19/politics/ukrainian-refugees-legal-status-us/index.html) to spiraling violence in [Haiti](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/01/americas/haiti-violence-explained-intl/index.html) to the Taliban’s return to power in [Afghanistan](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/07/americas/afghan-migrants-mexico-intl-latam/index.html).

Could the [Israel-Hamas war](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-27-23/index.html) lead to a rise in the number of Palestinian refugees coming to the US?

It’s [a complex situation for the Biden administration to consider](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/07/politics/joe-biden-israel-gaza/index.html), with global tensions on the rise and domestic political pressures intensifying by the minute.

And several US presidential hopefuls are already making the issue a major point in their primary campaign stump speeches.

Here’s a look at some key questions, and the answers we know so far.

**Are there any plans for the US to welcome refugees from Gaza?**

So far more than 1.4 million people have been displaced inside Gaza since war erupted after Hamas militants attacked Israel earlier this month, [according to the UN](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-18).

The Biden administration hasn’t announced any new measures to resettle Palestinian refugees in the United States, or any parole programs that would create a pathway for them to come here.

“Right now…the focus is on getting humanitarian assistance in and trying to work on some measure of safe passage out,” [National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/10/17/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-nsc-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-en-route-tel-aviv-israel/) earlier this month when asked whether some refugees from Gaza should come to the United States.

Egyptian officials have yet to open the only functional border crossing that would allow people to leave Gaza.

But on the Republican presidential primary campaign trail, several candidates have made a point of saying they’d block Palestinians from coming to the US over terrorism fears. [Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-attack-strategy-israel-mime-intl/index.html), the Palestinian militant group thatcontrols the enclave and attacked Israel earlier this month, [is considered a terrorist group](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/25/politics/us-law-enforcement-and-intelligence-agencies-launch-full-court-press-to-focus-on-hamas-following-israel-attack/index.html) by the US, the European Union and Israel

Some Republican lawmakers have even [introduced bills](https://www.daines.senate.gov/2023/10/17/daines-introduces-bill-to-prevent-biden-administration-from-giving-palestinians-american-visas-or-gaining-entry-through-administrations-parole-program/#:~:text=U.S.%20SENATE%20%E2%80%93%20U.S.%20Senator%20Steve,holders%20of%20Palestinian%20Authority%20passports.) dubbed “The GAZA Act,” with the letters of the Palestinian territory’s name standing for: “Guaranteeing Aggressors Zero Admission.”

Sunil Varghese, policy director of the International Refugee Assistance Project, calls such proposed measures xenophobic, and adds that they fail to acknowledge a fundamental reality.

“There’s no way to get out of Gaza. There’s no safe way to get out of the region. … Civilians in Gaza are stuck there under continuing bombardment. [Egypt](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/13/middleeast/egypt-rafah-crossing-gaza-palestinians-mime-intl/index.html) is not opening its borders. Israel is not opening its borders. … Even [Palestinian Americans cannot get out](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/26/opinions/palestinian-american-family-stranded-in-gaza-israel-okul-griffith/index.html),” Varghese says.

So discussions about banning Palestinian refugees from coming to the US don’t make logical sense, he says.

“It’s hard to see it as anything but fear-mongering,” Varghese says. “At the same time, I don’t think we should lose sight of the fact that there might be very, very vulnerable folks, even people with US ties, that we need to welcome.”

**What are Palestinians saying?**

Palestinians [who spoke with CNN recently from a refugee camp inside Jordan’s capital](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/25/middleeast/arabs-rally-palestinians-gaza-exodus-mime-intl/index.html) said their families don’t want to leave Gaza, even if the border crossings are opened.

“Gaza is their home. They will stay there even if it means being wiped out by an airstrike,” said Abdel-Munim Dababsheh, 49.

Hanya Sabawi, who left Gaza as an infant but whose family remains there, told CNN she doesn’t know whether her family will have homes to go back to.

“And the biggest fear of course, is that they’re going to be evacuated and turned into refugees. This is what everyone is now openly talking about, as if they didn’t matter,” she said. “They don’t want to move. They would rather die in Gaza than move.”

**Are Palestinian refugees already living in the US?**

The United Nations estimates that there are [5.9 million Palestinian refugees in the world](https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees), most of whom are now the descendants of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were expelled or fled their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. That includes [more than 1 million of Gaza’s roughly 2 million residents](https://cnn.com/2023/10/15/middleeast/gaza-history-explained-intl/index.html). Many other Palestinians live in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Far fewer live in the United States.

Of the more than 1 million refugees resettled in the United States in the past 20 years, just over 2,000 have been Palestinian, according to an analysis of government statistics by the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute.

“That’s, of course, a tiny number, and the numbers we see tell a lot of important dynamics,” says Jeanne Batalova, a senior policy analyst at the institute who manages its [Migration Data Hub](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/migration-data-hub).

One reason the number in the US is so small: Most Palestinian refugees are ineligible to be resettled in the United States due to [the way the US admits refugees](https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/30/politics/trump-immigration-ban-refugees-trnd/index.html). Most refugees come to the United States via the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but [another UN agency deals with most Palestinian refugees](https://support.iraplegalinfo.org/hc/en-us/articles/4415780716052-Why-are-Palestinian-refugees-treated-differently-than-other-refugees-), the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-palestine-10-25-23/h_985b2f516ac793ae8db2046db55c346d). That organization does not provide resettlement services, Varghese says.

That doesn’t mean there are not many people in the United States who consider themselves Palestinians. The number of people in the US claiming Palestinian ancestry has nearly quadrupled in the past 30 years, according to MPI’s analysis of government statistics. A growing share of them are US-born.

“The fact that we see the proportion of US-born people who identify as Palestinian growing,” Batalova says, “is because there are not that many coming in.”

**Could more Israelis start coming to the US if the fighting intensifies?**

The situation is different for Israeli citizens.

Coincidentally, just weeks before the war broke out, [the United States added Israel to the list of countries whose citizens don’t need to obtain tourist visas to enter the US](https://www.dhs.gov/news/2023/10/19/dhs-announces-start-applications-visa-free-travel-us-eligible-israeli-citizens-and#:~:text=On%20September%2026%2C%202023%2C%20DHS,the%20United%20States%20through%20ESTA.). The policy allows Israeli passport-holders to apply to enter for up to 90 days the US through a CBP electronic authorization system.

“Now there is an opportunity to come to the United States which was not available before, so we’ll see how that unfolds,” Batalova says.

So far, it appears the war has [been drawing Israelis to return to Israel from abroad and fight](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/world/israelis-returning-home-hamas-attack-intl/index.html), rather than inspiring many to flee the country. But if fighting intensifies, more may come to the US, Batalova says.

**Are we likely to see an influx of people from the region arriving at the US-Mexico border?**

When war erupted in Ukraine, cities along the US-Mexico border began to see a [notable increase in arrivals of Ukrainians and Russians who were seeking asylum in the US](https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/29/us/ukrainians-us-mexico-border-cec/index.html).

Something similar is unlikely to occur in this case, Batalova says, because Palestinians in Gaza are essentially a “trapped population” that’s not free to travel. And the recent changes to US policy that make it easier for Israelis to travel directly to the United States make a stopover in Mexico unnecessary.

In addition to vows to ban refugees from Gaza from coming to the United States, several GOP presidential primary contenders have also [claimed, without evidence](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/10/politics/trump-israel-terror-immigration-policy/index.html), that those responsible for the October 7 terror attacks in Israel are already crossing the US-Mexico border.

But a US Customs and Border protection spokesperson told CNN that the agency has seen “no indication of Hamas-directed foreign fighters seeking to make entry into the United States.”**What policy steps is the US likely to take?**

“Uniting for Ukraine,” a Biden administrations program, has allowed [more than 100,000 Ukrainians](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/19/politics/ukrainian-refugees-legal-status-us/index.html) to come to the United States since [it began in 2022](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/21/politics/biden-administration-ukraine-refugees/index.html).

t’s unlikely the Biden administration would create a similar program for Palestinians, Batalova says, given existing domestic political pressures, such as the influx of migrants from all over the world already at the US-Mexico border.

Smaller efforts may be more likely, she says, such offering temporary protected status to the hundreds of Palestinians who are in the US on student visas.

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Batalova says. “There might be some small-scale symbolic measures.”

But the more than 1 million people in Gaza who’ve already been displaced in this war are unlikely to find a home in the United States.

The intensifying rivalry between Florida Gov. [Ron DeSantis](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/14/politics/desantis-us-gaza-refugees/index.html) and former South Carolina Gov. [Nikki Haley](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/10/15/sotu-hailey-reacts-to-gaza.cnn) to lay claim to the mantle of [Donald Trump](https://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/president-donald-trump-45)’s top challenger, playing out for weeks in closed-door meetings with donors, burst into the open amid [the fallout](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-18-23/index.html) from the deadly Hamas attack on Israel.

DeSantis in recent days has all but accused Haley of inviting Palestinian refugees to the United States – a position she has not advocated – while dismissing her experience as US ambassador to the United Nations, which he called “a worthless organization.” Haley’s team accused DeSantis of lying about her record because his White House bid is “sputtering.”

“We know we’re running for president, and he’s trying to say whatever he can,” Haley told Fox News on Tuesday.

Gone are the days when DeSantis had the luxury of ignoring Haley in the Republican presidential race. The unusually heated back-and-forth over foreign policy – a topic seldom at the forefront of the primary until this month – has become the biggest flashpoint yet.

Less than three months before the Iowa caucuses open the voting in the Republican presidential race, a furious scramble is underway to emerge as the top alternative to Trump, the commanding front-runner, with DeSantis and Haley locked in the fiercest competition – for donors, voters and party activists.

The behind-the-scenes jockeying came to a head last week in Dallas, where a group of prospective donors summoned the campaigns of both DeSantis and Haley [to make a case](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/13/politics/nikki-haley-ron-desantis-gop-donors/index.html) for financial support down the stretch. DeSantis’ team contended he is their best hope to stop Trump from winning the GOP presidential nomination. Haley allies said DeSantis was old news, while she was on the rise.

DeSantis’ actions of late suggest he views Haley as an emerging threat – if not for the nomination then at the very least to his chances of consolidating support before Iowa. He is increasingly confronted by chatter surrounding Haley, including from local reporters in New Hampshire and South Carolina – two states where she is polling ahead of him.

Early on, DeSantis regularly sidestepped questions about Haley’s competing aspirations for the GOP nomination as he was laser-focused on dethroning Trump. And before Monday, DeSantis and his campaign hadn’t posted once about Haley on X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter.

But starting Monday, his rapid response team’s X account mentioned Haley six times in 24 hours, and DeSantis has stepped up his criticism of her in recent radio and television appearances.

The subject of those attacks stems from the debate over Palestinian refugees caught in Israel’s war with Hamas. DeSantis, who cast all Palestinians as antisemitic, said the US shouldn’t welcome any refugees from Gaza.

Asked during a Sunday appearance on CNN about DeSantis’ characterization of Palestinians, Haley said, “America has always been sympathetic to the fact that you can separate civilians from terrorists.” She said half of Palestinians don’t want to live under Hamas’ rule.

On Monday on Fox News Radio, DeSantis accused Haley of catering to “elites,” and his campaign on X mischaracterized her response as “openness to admitting Gaza refugees to the US” – something she has said she opposes. DeSantis himself could not identify anyone pushing for the US to take in Palestinian refugees, telling CBS News on Sunday, “I think some on the far left have said this.”

But that hasn’t stopped Never Back Down, a DeSantis-allied super PAC, from featuring Haley’s remarks in a new ad airing in Iowa and New Hampshire, as well as on national television and streaming services. SFA Inc., a super PAC backing Haley, accused Never Back Down of misrepresenting her record out of desperation.

Haley, who has leaned on her background as Trump’s UN ambassador during this period of international tumult, told Fox News on Tuesday that “Hamas-sympathizing countries should take these Gazans now.”

DeSantis, who draws from his experience serving in the Navy during the Iraq War, said Haley had “flipped.” Asked about DeSantis’ criticism of her, Haley told Fox, “I’ve always said we shouldn’t take any Gazan refugees in the US.”

**Unfolding duel**

A feverish chase is on between DeSantis and Haley to win over high-level donors.

Haley is capitalizing on her strong performances in the first two primary debates, trying to entice some of the biggest Republican contributors to take a leap of faith and invest in her candidacy. In closed-door meetings last week in Park City, Utah, and Dallas, she made a case for herself and against DeSantis.

“It’s time to get in the game,” Haley implored donors in Utah, according to an attendee at the Republican summit at the Stein Eriksen Lodge, where many prominent contributors gathered with Utah Sen. Mitt Romney in an ongoing quest to find the strongest candidate to challenge Trump.

In a win for the former South Carolina governor, Keith Rabois, a top Florida contributor who has previously expressed admiration for DeSantis, is now committed to helping Haley, CNN learned. He sent invitations for a $10,000-a-person fundraiser to benefit her campaign at his Miami home this week. She also recently picked up the endorsement of former Rep. Will Hurd after the Texas Republican suspended his presidential campaign. Meanwhile, longtime conservative columnist George Will urged South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott to drop out of the GOP presidential race and get behind Haley – even as Will’s wife advises Scott’s bid.

In public and private conversations, Haley’s advisers have been bluntly arguing that momentum is on her side and her candidacy offers the best chance to consolidate the anyone-but-Trump sentiment inside the GOP.

But DeSantis remains ahead of Haley in most national surveys and, critically, in Iowa. In Dallas, DeSantis’ team argued that he remained best positioned to take on Trump in Iowa, where the Florida governor is on a path to visit all 99 counties and has built out a political operation in the mold of 2016 caucuses winner Sen. Ted Cruz. The DeSantis campaign also shared internal polling that showed Haley voters would scatter among the remaining candidates if she dropped out, but that wouldn’t be the case were the governor to drop out.

“If I wasn’t in the picture, most of those voters who are going to caucus for me would go to Trump – they would not go to Haley,” DeSantis said later, summarizing the pitch during a campaign stop in New Hampshire.

“People can support who they want, but let’s just not kid ourselves,” DeSantis said. “The nominee for the GOP is either going to be Donald Trump or it’s going to be me. There’s not a path for anybody else.”

And while Haley’s standing has been on the rise, based on a series of polls and the latest fundraising reports, she still has considerable ground to make up. It was only last week that she opened her first Iowa campaign office and began bolstering her staff on the ground. DeSantis has campaign chairs in every Iowa county.

Those fundraising reports, though, also showed that DeSantis is burning through cash at a fast rate and has $1 million in unpaid bills, a warning that the financial troubles from the summer – when his campaign overspent and shed staff – may not be fully behind him. Haley, meanwhile, has spent more conservatively and has more money available for the primary race than DeSantis.

Haley also hired two top Republican strategists with deep Iowa experience, including Hooff Cooksey, the campaign manager for Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds’ successful reelection effort, and Troy Bishop, the field director for Iowa Sen. Charles Grassley’s winning 2022 campaign. She is hiring more staff this month, aides said, but she still has fewer people on the ground than DeSantis and his affiliated super PAC.

Both DeSantis and Haley will travel to Iowa again this weekend as their campaigns circle each other in the Hawkeye State.

Bob Vander Plaats, who leads an influential Christian group in Iowa and is seen as especially close to DeSantis, told CNN that the Florida governor “has been doing everything right to win an Iowa caucus.”

Still, Vander Plaats said Haley “definitely has the time and the lane,” and momentum can be a powerful factor for Iowans.

“The infrastructure will take you far, but it will only take you so far,” Vander Plaats said. “You have to rely on the organic nature of the caucus as well.”

As the DeSantis campaign has failed to live up to its lofty expectations, Haley has exceeded hers, with the fight between a current Southern governor and a former one now fully joined. Both candidates are already preparing for a critical face-to-face meeting on November 8, when Republican contenders gather in Miami for their third debate.

It’s not just donors and voters who are watching the duel unfold.

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, who has said he intends to make an endorsement in the Republican presidential race, and Iowa’s Reynolds, who has not ruled out doing so, are closely studying the trajectory of DeSantis and Haley, aides told CNN, in their respective search to find a Plan B to Trump.

While DeSantis has made clear that his path has all but come down to trying to beat Trump in Iowa, Haley is playing more of a long game. Her advisers say a strong showing in Iowa, followed by a New Hampshire surprise, would set her up favorably when the race reaches her native South Carolina, home to the first Southern primary.

“I like her more than any of the other candidates,” said Tom Boyer, a retired math tutor from New Hampshire, who came to see Haley at a recent event. “I just like the way she presents herself and speaks to the people. I’m hoping she does well.”

Universities should be places where young people advocate for the causes they believe in, and yes, demonstrate. But they should not condone or foster the kind of extremism condemning Palestinians to eternal hell-on-earth — the type that [extremist ministers](https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-756619) in the Israeli governments, [Itamar Ben Gvir](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/25/world/israeli-minister-racist-claim-intl/index.html) and [Bezalel Smotrich](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/01/middleeast/west-bank-smotrich-ned-price-intl/index.html), openly promote.

To all those [protesting in support of the Palestinian people](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/04/us/washington-dc-ceasefire-protests-palestine/index.html), thank you. But to those who think you are supportingmy people [by defending Hamas,](https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/support-hamas-terror-anti-israel-rallies-across-us) please be aware: Your radical positions aren’t helping us. They are hurting us more.

In the tiny Gaza Strip, where [2.3 million Palestinians](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gaza-faces-perfect-storm-deadly-diseases-2023-12-14/) live, half of those are refugees from the newly founded state of Israel —and their descendants from the1948 Arab-Israeli war. For 75 years the refugees have been living in crowded refugee camps depending on United Nations Relief and Works Agency for food rations, education and health care.

Four months ago, I had the chance to visit the city of [Safed](https://www.britannica.com/place/Zefat), now in Israel, where my mother’s house once stood. As the son of a native Gazan father and a mother who was forced to flee Safed in the upper Galilee, I am a product of both lineages. Recalling how my mom gave up her home, moving from one refugee camp to another, I was overwhelmed by sadness.

Ad Feedback

My people’s history has been marked by pain, but until October 7, I didn’t know the full extent of the horrors we would endure. More than two months into the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, [more than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-23-23/index.html#:~:text=%22With%20more%20than%2020%2C000%20Palestinians,IRC%20said%20in%20a%20statement.) in Israeli attacks and more than 50,000 have been injured,according to the Hamas-run health ministry, and [thousands of homes](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-33) have been destroyed. Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israel killed [at least 1,200 people](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-intelligence-intl/index.html#:~:text=The%20operation%20saw%20at%20least,hostage%20by%20the%20militant%20group.). [The terrorist group also took around 240 hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/middleeast/israeli-hostages-released-accounts-hamas-intl-hnk/index.html) and has brought back the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip and marked a new catastrophe in the history of my people.

The impact of this conflict has reverberated around the world, including on US college campuses where I have spent much of my life trying to build bridges. Since 2015, when I started OneVoice on Campus, I have worked to counteract student body polarization related to the conflict. These efforts build on my work dating back to 1990 when I first came to the United States to finish my degree in political science with a specialization in conflict resolution and peace building.

In 2006, I opened the office of [OneVoice](http://www.onevoicemovement.org/) Gaza in Gaza City to galvanize Palestinians behind the goal of a two-state solution reached through negotiation with Israel and our neighbors.

As a proud Palestinian from Gaza who has dedicated my adult life to trying to put an end to this never-ending cycle of war and suffering for my people, I have learned this: No matter how much you and your people are hurting, more hateful absolutism — from either side — is never the answer. While glorifying radical positions may feel like advancing social justice, it only contributes to the very extremism that makes peace impossible.

On the Israeli side, the Knesset must move from an approach of conflict management to one focused on engaging incontinuous negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, aimed at reaching an end to the military occupation and the emergence of a negotiated two-state reality. On the Palestinian side, those supporting Hamas’ terrorism must stop.

In Gaza’s legislative council elections of 2005 and 2006, I, along with [more than 50% of voting age Palestinians](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/24/gaza-election-hamas-2006-palestine-israel/), voted for Fatah, which controlled the Palestinian Authority at the time. I did not vote for Hamas because they rejected peace, coexistence and a two-state solution and adopted armed resistance against Israel. Unfortunately, Fatah candidates split the vote, giving power to Hamas, who received only [44.45% of the people’s vote](https://www.elections.ps/Portals/0/pdf/Votes%20for%20lists%20per%20districts.pdf) with only one majority win in one out of 16 districts

Hamas should have been disqualified from running in the first place for its unwillingness to recognize the Oslo Accords of 1993 that made the election possible. However, [two factors led to Hamas’ participation](https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/gaza-news/article-773669) in the 2005 elections. First, then-President of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas thought Hamas would change and that his party, Fatah, would win. Second, US President George W. Bush’s administration clearly misunderstood the situation in the region and, in his [effort to spread democracy](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/27/politics/bush-defends-his-goal-of-spreading-democracy-to-the-mideast.html), supported the inclusion of all Palestinian factions in the election and didn’t push to stop Hamas from running even though Hamas had been identified as a terrorist organization by the US Department of State in 1993.

Since 2007, when Hamas administered its [bloody coup](https://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/06/20/gaza/index.html) against the Palestinian Authority, Gazans have been subject to collective punishment policies from Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt, which [closed its border](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/14/world/middleeast/gaza-border-rafah-egypt.html) to Gaza (only briefly [opening it on occasion](https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231103-the-gaza-egypt-rafah-crossing-explained-it-is-not-a-normal-border) to allow the movement of people and some goods).

[Israel has imposed restrictive regulations](https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution), including on [food](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hunger-spreads-in-gaza-as-fighting-rages-677b73d8)and [mobility](https://www.btselem.org/topic/freedom_of_movement) in Gaza. And Hamas’ October 7 massacre has thrown us deeper into violence and conflict. Make no mistake: Hamas does not represent me and my people.

By using violence (which it does not hesitate to inflict upon civilians) to achieve its goals, [Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-attack-strategy-israel-mime-intl/index.html) is a terrorist organization by definition. The overwhelming majority of Palestinians do not condone violence and acts of terror. Those who lump us together with a terrorist group contribute to misconceptions and stereotypes about our people that sow anti-Muslim hate.

Associating our people with hatred and destruction has put us in harm’s way. [The Council on American-Islamic Relations](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/muslim-americans-spike-hate-incidents-feels-reminiscent-post-911-islam-rcna122570) reportedly saw a 182% jump in requests for help and reports of bias incidents against Muslims in the USfrom October 7 to October 22 from an average 16-day period in 2022.And the US [Justice Department](https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/11/27/shooting-palestinian-men-burlington-vermont) is now investigating whether last month’s shooting of [three Palestinian college students](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/27/us/palestinian-student-shooting-burlington-vermont-tuesday/index.html) in Burlington, Vermont, was [a hate crime](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/29/us/hate-crime-explained-vermont-palestinian-shooting-reaj/index.html).

To those who were exhilarated at witnessing Hamas’ acts, I ask whether you have experienced the centuries of pain my people have suffered. For us, it is not a video on TikTok; it’s real life. I ask whether you can bring us closer to the ultimate goal of peace.

To those calling for absolutist solutions that rule out common ground between Israelis and Palestinians, you undermine the long-term dream of having an independent Palestinian state next to Israel: [a two-state solution](https://www.npr.org/2023/10/27/1208694837/two-state-solution-israeli-palestinian-conflict) won through negotiations and diplomacy. If you really want to free us from the cycle of war and suffering, help free our world from the plague of radicalism altogether.

The main UN agency in Gaza is in turmoil after Israel accused some of its staff members of involvement in Hamas’ October 7 terror attacks.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) fired several employees in the wake of the allegations, which have not been made public.

Following Israel’s allegations, UNRWA’s main donor, the United States, and a growing number of countries have paused funding to the organization, which employs about 13,000 people in Gaza, as the humanitarian disaster spirals in the besieged Palestinian enclave.

Here’s what we know.

**What is UNRWA?**

UNRWA was established by the United Nations after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war to provide humanitarian assistance for displaced Palestinians.

Ad Feedback

The organization characterizes Palestinian refugees as any “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 War.”

Those who fit that definition and their descendants [now number 5.9 million](https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees), all of whom are considered eligible for UNRWA support. Israel has rejected the possibility of allowing the displaced Palestinians to return home, arguing that the move would change the country’s Jewish character.

Since its establishment, the United Nations’ General Assembly – a voting body of all member states – has repeatedly renewed UNRWA’s mandate. The agency has provided aid to four generations of Palestine refugees, according to its website, covering education, health care, camp infrastructure, social services and emergency assistance, including in times of conflict.

At least [152 UNRWA staffers](https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-69-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-Jerusalem) have been killed in Gaza since the Israel-Hamas war began, according to the agency.

**What are the allegations?**

Details remain scant. Neither Israel nor UNRWA have specified the nature of the alleged involvement of UNRWA employees in the events of October 7.

An Israeli official told CNN on Friday that Israel shared information about 12 staffers allegedly involved in the October 7 attacks both with UNRWA and the US.

The head of Israel’s Military Intelligence Directorate, Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva, met with senior US officials on Friday and gave them “specific names and which organizations they are affiliated with, whether Hamas or PIJ (Palestinian Islamic Jihad) or others, and what exactly they did on October 7,” the Israeli official said.

“We showed them that we had solid intelligence from difference sources.”

An Israeli official familiar with how the intelligence was gathered said it was taken from Hamas computers and documents confiscated during operations in Gaza, and from interrogations of detainees and alleged terrorists.

Israeli officials say some of the attackers who were killed or detained on October 7 had UNRWA IDs on them. CNN was not shown the IDs or other intelligence.

Israel passed a dossier to the US government that includes specific and as-yet unverified accusations against the 12 UNWRA employees, [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/28/world/middleeast/gaza-unrwa-hamas-israel.html) reported on Sunday.

The dossier alleges one person is accused of kidnapping a woman, another is said to have distributed ammunition, while another employee is described as participating in a kibbutz massacre in which 97 people were killed, the Times reported, adding that it had verified the identify of one of the employees. Two Western officials told the Times they had been briefed on the dossier but had not yet verified the claims.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini has said he received “information about the alleged involvement of several employees.” To protect the agency’s ability to deliver humanitarian assistance in Gaza, he decided “to immediately terminate the contracts of these staff members and launch an investigation in order to establish the truth,” a statement said.

Any UNRWA employee who was involved in acts of terror “will be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution,” he added.

In a statement Sunday, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said nine of the 12 UNRWA staff members at the center of the allegations had been fired. One other was dead and the identities of two others were still “being clarified.”

“Any UN employee involved in acts of terror will be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution,” Guterres said, adding that an independent review is forthcoming.

In addition to the staffers’ alleged October 7 involvement, the Israel Defense Forces on Saturday alleged in a statement to CNN that UNRWA facilities were used for “terrorist purposes.”

Asked about that claim, the agency told CNN, “We don’t have more information on this at this stage. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (the internal oversight body of the UN) will look into all these allegations as part of the investigation the Commissioner General of UNRWA has requested them to undertake.”

In a statement Saturday, Hamas criticized the decision to end the employees’ contracts, and accused Israel of trying to undermine UNRWA and other organizations providing humanitarian relief in Gaza.

**How is Israel’s relationship with the UN?**

Israel’s relations with the UN have sunk to a historic low in recent months.

Senior UN officials have been highly critical of Israel’s war conduct in Gaza, which has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run health authority in the territory. Israeli diplomats meanwhile have been angered by UN calls for a ceasefire.

In December, Israeli diplomats [lashed out](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/08/middleeast/israel-un-diplomatic-showdown-hamas-war-mime-intl/index.html) when UN Secretary-General António Guterres invoked a rarely used diplomatic tool to bring the conflict before the UN Security Council. In a letter to the 15-member council, Guterres urged the body to “press to avert a humanitarian catastrophe” and unite in a call for a full humanitarian ceasefire.

Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan, who has argued that a ceasefire “cements Hamas’ control of Gaza,” criticized Guterres for the move, noting that recent wars in Ukraine, Yemen, and Syria hadn’t prompted the same response.

The Israeli allegations against UNRWA on Friday came on the same day that the UN’s top court ordered Israel to act immediately to prevent genocide in Gaza.

UNRWA has long been a target of Israeli criticism. Israel has accused the UN agency of anti-Israel incitement, which UNRWA denies. In 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to dismantle the UN body, saying it should be merged with the main UN refugee agency.

In November, an Israeli journalist claimed on social media platform X that one of the hostage takers in Gaza was a teacher at an UNRWA-run school. That report was picked up by [Israeli news outlets](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-775777), prompting the UN agency call for an “immediate stop” to the spreading of “unsubstantiated claims” about the organization.

UNRWA has repeatedly [denied allegations](https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/remarks%E2%80%AF-unrwa-commissioner-general-philippe-lazzarini%E2%80%AF-occupied) that its aid is being diverted to Hamas or that it teaches hatred in its schools, and has questioned “the motivation of those who make such claims.” The agency has condemned the Hamas attack on October 7 as “abhorrent.”

**How has the world reacted?**

Several Western countries announced the suspension of funding for UNRWA in the wake of the allegations. The US State Department on Friday said it had “temporarily paused additional funding” to the agency.

Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Finland and the Netherlands all followed suit. Japan said Monday it has suspended funding “for the time being.”

But other countries, including Ireland and Norway, said they would continue funding UNRWA.

Norway’s government on Saturday said “the situation in Gaza is catastrophic, and UNRWA is the most important humanitarian organization there … International support for Palestine is needed now more than ever.”

In a statement Sunday, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas urged countries suspending funding for UNRWA to reconsider.

“Such positions, if maintained, would disproportionately punish millions of our people without just cause,” Abbas said, according to WAFA, the official Palestinian news agency.

Abbas accused Israel of acting out of hostility for the UN agency, saying: “Officials in the Israeli government openly expressed that there would be no role for UNRWA, revealing the true motive behind this campaign.”

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz suggested Friday that Israel will [seek to stop UNRWA](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-27-24/h_4e9d56370b121aa273702f385127c4af) from operating in post-war Gaza.

UNRWA chief Lazzarini described the funding suspensions as “shocking” and urged donor countries to reconsider. Such decisions threaten the organization’s humanitarian relief for millions of people, he warned.

Funding has long been a challenge for UNRWA and the suspension of funding by key backers – however brief – raises question on how it will be able to continue to help people in Gaza amid [growing fears of starvation](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/middleeast/gaza-famine-starvation-un-israel-war-intl-hnk/index.html).

The US [previously cut support altogether](https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/31/politics/trump-administration-ending-funding-palestinian-refugees/index.html) to UNRWA under the presidency of Donald Trump before being restored under Joe Biden.

Hamas is considering a new framework proposed by Egypt that calls for the group to release as many as 33 hostages kidnapped from Israel in exchange for a pause in [hostilities in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/29/middleeast/israeli-airstrike-rafah-gaza-intl), an Israeli source familiar with the negotiations and a foreign diplomatic source told CNN.

The latest proposal, which Israel helped craft but has not fully agreed to, is laid out in two phases, the first of which calls for 20 to 33 hostages to be released over several weeks in exchange for the pause and the release of Palestinian prisoners. The second phase is what sources described as the “restoration of sustainable calm,” during which the remaining hostages, captive Israeli soldiers and the bodies of hostages would be [exchanged for more Palestinian prisoners.](https://cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-palestine-04-29-24/index.html)

The diplomatic source familiar with the talks said the reference to sustainable calm was “a way to agree to a permanent ceasefire without calling it that.”

At the same time, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he believes a deal is “achievable because the Israelis put a strong proposal on the table.” The top diplomat, speaking to the press at a humanitarian aid site in Jordan, said Washington wants to see the agreement come together “in the coming days.”

After months of deadlock, agreement from both sides would be a major step toward ending the war. But a failure to agree could deepen Israel’s presence in Gaza – if no deal is made, Israel is likely to launch a large-scale ground invasion into the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where more than 1 million Palestinians are sheltering. Israel’s allies, including the United States, have warned against the operation due to the potential for large-scale civilian casualties.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned on Tuesday, however, that Israel would launch an operation in Rafah “with or without a deal.”

Israel is awaiting a response from Hamas, whose delegation met Egyptian and Qatari mediators in Cairo on Monday. An Israeli official told CNN early on Tuesday that a mid-level Israeli delegation of security officials could travel to Cairo Tuesday, but it wasn’t clear if it did.

A response from Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in Gaza, is expected within days.

The length of the first phase of the pause in hostilities would be linked to the number of hostages released, with the latest framework calling for a one-day pause for each hostage, the Israeli source said, although this number is expected to shift during more in-depth negotiations.

The release of 40 hostages for a six-week ceasefire had been the basis of negotiations for months, but Israel has agreed to accept fewerhostages in the first phase after Hamas dropped its offer to fewer than 20 people earlier this month.

**‘Extraordinarily generous’ proposal**

Blinken said on Monday that Hamas has been presented with a ceasefire proposal that is “extraordinarily generous on the part of Israel.”

“In this moment the only thing standing between the people of Gaza and a ceasefire is Hamas,” he told World Economic Forum (WEF) President Børge Brende in the Saudi capital Riyadh. “They (Hamas) have to decide and they have to decide quickly,” he said. “I’m hopeful that they will make the right decision.”

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, also speaking in Riyadh, said he was hopeful that Israel and Hamas will accept the proposal.

“There is a proposal on the table, up to the two sides to consider and accept but certainly the objective is a ceasefire, a permanent ceasefire and dealing with the humanitarian conditions,” Shoukry told a panel at the WEF in Riyadh on Monday.

He said he is hopeful that “the proposal has been taken into account” and that “we are waiting to have a final decision.”

Israeli officials have expressed an openness to negotiating the “restoration of sustainable calm” as part of a comprehensive deal that would effectively end the war.

An Israeli source familiar with the negotiations said Egypt has proposed the parties agree to a one-year ceasefire as part of a comprehensive deal that would see Israeli forces withdraw from Gaza and the release of all remaining hostages and the bodies of those who have died.

CNN has reached out to the Egyptian government for comment.

Hamas has insisted that a permanent ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza should be part of the agreement. Israel has thus far maintained that its operation in Gaza will continue until Hamas is eradicated.

Israel has also now agreed to the unrestricted movement of Palestinians to northern Gaza, the sources said, a key demand by Hamas which has held back negotiations in the past.

**Rafah operation**

Hanging over the negotiations is the prospect of an Israeli military offensive in Rafah, which Israeli officials have signposted for months but are now holding back, saying they want to give space to the negotiations.

Israeli sources have characterized the latest Egyptian effort to broker a deal as the last chance to avert that offensive.

Netanyahu complicated the situation on Tuesday, telling hostage families that Israeli troops will “enter Rafah and eliminate the Hamas battalions there – with or without a deal,” according to the prime minister’s office.

On Tuesday, the Israeli military said commanders had approved “upcoming missions” for a possible offensive into Rafah, although US officials told CNN there were no signs of an imminent offensive.

The US and other allies of Israel warned such an operation would not have their support unless adequate measures were taken to ensure the safety of civilians.

Blinken said in Riyadh the US had “not yet seen a plan that civilians can be effectively protected.”

US officials do not view Israel’s recent public threats of a potential Rafah incursion as empty rhetoric, one senior administration official said, adding that some signs of preparations related to the possible displacement of civilians had been seen. The threat is also seen by US officials as part of the ongoing efforts to pressure Hamas to accept a ceasefire and hostages release deal.

“Our position on Rafah is absolutely the same,” White House national security spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Tuesday.

“We don’t want to see a major ground operation in Rafah,” Kirby said. “Certainly, we don’t want to see operations that hadn’t factored in safety and security of those 1.5 million folks trying to seek refuge down there.”

In a call Sunday with Netanyahu, US President Joe Biden addressed the need for increased humanitarian assistance and “reiterated his clear position” on a potential Israeli invasion of Rafah, according to a White House readout of the conversation.

Philippe Lazzarini, chief of the UN’s Palestinian agency UNRWA, said there is “an extraordinary deep anxiety prevailing” in Gaza, as human rights organizations warned [of “cruel”](https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gaza-military-offensive-rafah-would-be-cruel-and-heart-breaking-blow#:~:text=Civilians%20in%20Rafah%20and%20throughout,is%20hard%20enough%20to%20contemplate.) and catastrophic consequences ahead of Israel’s looming assault in Rafah.

“People have not yet been asked to evacuate from Rafah, but there is a sense that if there is no deal this week that this can happen at any time,” he said in a press conference from Geneva on Tuesday.

**Rising death toll**

The death toll from Israel’s bombardment in Gaza continued to climb over the weekend.

Twenty two people, including at least one infant and a toddler, [were killed](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/29/middleeast/israeli-airstrike-rafah-gaza-intl/index.html) following an Israeli airstrike over Rafah, Gaza, overnight into Monday, according to hospital officials.

And in Gaza City, seven Palestinians were killed and dozens injured in two separate Israeli airstrikes overnight, Gaza Civil Defense spokesperson Mahmmoud Basal told CNN. An Israeli airstrike struck a two-story house belonging to the Tartouri family in the port area west of Gaza City, killing 5 Palestinians and wounding several others, Basal said.

In a separate attack, two people were killed and several others injured when an Israeli airstrike targeted a house belonging to the Hijazi family in the Sabra neighborhood in the center of Gaza City, according to Basal.

Israeli attacks in Gaza have killed 34,535 Palestinians and injured another 77,704 people, the Ministry of Health there reported on April 30. At least 72% of those killed are women and children, according to the ministry.

Twenty-two people, including at least one infant and a toddler, have been killed in an Israeli airstrike over Rafah, [Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/27/middleeast/shaima-refaat-alareer-death-intl/index.html), overnight into Monday, according to hospital officials.

The deceased were brought into Abu Youssef Al Najjar hospital in Rafah following the attack, as their loved ones gathered for their final farewells.

A video filmed for CNN in the hospital courtyard shows several body bags laid on the ground with dozens of anguished people including men, women and children crowded around their late loved ones.

People are seen crouching over the body bags, with some caressing their loved one’s lifeless bodies. At least one baby’s head can be seen sticking out of a bag, as the woman beside it shouts: “My whole family has perished.”

The baby’s uncle, Mahmoud Abu Taha, was carrying the 1-year-old’s lifeless body while talking to the camera, saying his parents had tried having children for 10 years before he was born.

“We were sitting in our homes, not doing anything. It was unexpected when they struck the house. Everyone was asleep in their beds… most of the people that were killed were displaced… they were women and children,” he said.

Lifting the baby boy’s body to the camera, Mahmoud Abu Taha cries out, “this is who they are targeting. This is their objective. This is the generation they’re looking for. This is the safe Rafah they talk about.”

In response to a CNN request for comment regarding the Rafah strike on Monday, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said in a statement that its fighter jets “struck terror targets where terrorists were operating within a civilian area in southern Gaza.”

“The IDF will continue to foil terrorist activity and protect Israeli civilians, in accordance with international law,”

Another member of the Abu Taha family says in the video that 10 of his relatives were killed in the airstrike. Some of his relatives were originally displaced from Khan Younis, where several of them were killed in a previous Israeli airstrike. The remaining few who had fled Khan Younis for the safety of Rafah have now been killed overnight in Rafah, he says.

“They were sleeping in their homes when the airstrike hit at around 12:20 am…nowhere is safe. The entire Gaza Strip is a target,” he told CNN.

He called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to stop the war, saying “we want to live. We want peace. Enough Arab bloodshed.”

Another eyewitness says a five-day-old boy named Ghaith Abu Rayya was killed in the airstrike. The footage shows him opening a small body bag to reveal the infant’s head, saying his body has been dismembered.

“We are all alone. Nobody cares about us,” he cries.

He is seen opening another body bag next to Ghaith’s, sobbing, and saying, “my beloved Ramy,” who he says is Ghaith’s 33-year-old father.

Several men are seen bringing in another body bag with the name “Ahmad Saleem Abu Taha” written across it, and the crowded people start wailing in distress.

One woman caresses the lifeless face, which has been left exposed, saying: “Oh his smell. Oh God. Goodbye my beloved.”

The death toll in the Gaza Strip has risen to at least 34,454 following 205 days of war between Israel and Hamas, the Ministry of Health in Gaza reported on Sunday. The ministry does not distinguish between casualties among civilians and Hamas fighters.

The Israeli soldiers stand rifles in hand, arm over shoulder, speaking to the camera. Behind them is the shell of a Gazan building.

“We are here adding light after the black sabbath that the people of Israel had,” one of the men says in the video, circulating on Telegram. “We are occupying, deporting, and settling. Occupying, deporting, and settling. Did you hear that Bibi? Occupying, deporting, and settling.”

As Israel’s war against Hamas enters its fourth month, the Israeli government has said little of substance, at least in any official way, on its plans for post-war Gaza.

Hamas seized control of the territory – home to about 2.2 million Palestinians – from the Palestinian Authority in 2007, two years after Israel unilaterally withdrew all its troops and about 8,000 Jewish settlers. Who governs it after Israel’s war against Hamas concludes is an open question.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected the idea of establishing Jewish settlements, but has said only that neither Hamas nor the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority should govern the territory, and that Israel will keep “full security control.”

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, a member of Netanyahu’s right-wing Likud party, has released his own proposal, saying that there should be “no Israeli presence in the Gaza Strip,” but light on detail about what governance there would look like.

Into that void has stepped a group – once fringe, but now in the governing coalition –that hopes for full Israeli control, to [resettle Gaza and even expel Palestinians](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/05/middleeast/israel-government-divisions-gaza-plan-intl/index.html). And its ideas are permeating mainstream debate.

“We must promote a solution to encourage the emigration of the residents of Gaza,” far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir said on January 1.

Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who also holds a position in the Defense Ministry, says that Israel “will rule there. And in order to rule there securely for a long time, we must have a civilian presence.”

The United States’ top diplomat is concerned enough that he has [publicly rebuked those plans](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-08-24/h_4c1b640eddcf6d0fff6d49e77de69054).

“These statements are irresponsible, they’re inflammatory, and they only make it harder to secure a future of Palestinian-led Gaza with Hamas no longer in control, and with terrorist groups no longer able to threaten Israel’s security,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a recent trip to Qatar.

Polling in Israel on the question of re-establishing settlements varies widely, reflecting subtleties in how the question is asked, and the fact that public opinion in the wake of Hamas’ October 7 attack is wildly in flux, says Dahlia Scheindlin, a polling expert, journalist, and contributor to Israeli newspaper Haaretz

The general range goes from about 25% who want to re-establish permanent communities, Jewish Israeli communities in Gaza, to somewhere in the 40% range,” she told CNN of several polls conducted in November and December. “That is not a small portion of Israeli society.”

There is also an established track record in Israel of politicians pushing seemingly extremist ideas into mainstream conversation, and even into law. Netanyahu last year supported an effort started by a right-wing minister from his own Likud party to push through a [law limiting the Supreme Court’s ability](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/02/middleeast/israel-supreme-court-ruling-netanyahu-explained-intl/index.html) to scrutinize legislation, despite months of protests that roiled the nation. That proposal never had majority support, but the Knesset nonetheless passed it into law. The Supreme Court struck down the proposal earlier this month, saying it would deal a “severe and unprecedented blow to the core characteristics of the State of Israel as a democratic state.”

“Ideas that often seem very extreme at a certain phase in Israel’s history can over time become increasingly normalized very incrementally – sometimes a little bit below the radar, not exactly hidden, but not exactly advertised,” Scheindlin said of Israeli policymaking.

Diana Buttu, a Palestinian human rights lawyer who has served as an adviser to the Palestinian Authority, gives little credence to Netanyahu’s professed opposition to re-establishing settlements in Gaza.

“As much as Netanyahu may say that he’s not going to do it, he will ultimately,” she told CNN. “Because we as Palestinians have long learned that they end up finding some sort of excuse – you know, the coalition needs to stay together, whatever. And Palestinians always pay the price for it.”

**People are ‘waking up’**

Far from a new idea, the desire to re-settle Gaza comes from decades of frustration with then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s 2004 decision to dismantle 21 Israel settlements in Gaza – known as Gush Katif – and expel their 8,000 Jewish residents, a process which was completed in 2005.

Settler activists like Yishai Fleisher, a spokesman for Jewish settlers in Hebron, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, sense an opportunity.

“For people like myself who are on the so-called Israeli right, who have been warning about this situation for years, who protested the 2005 disengagement, nothing has changed,” Fleisher told CNN. “October 7 was just proof for what we’ve been saying all along.”

As a protester, in 2005, Fleisher was among those ejected from Gaza by the Israeli government. With public opinion in flux, he hopes that his movement’s moment has come.

“People are waking up – they’re trying to open their minds,” he said of fellow Israelis, reevaluating their politics in the wake of October 7.

If Palestinians in Gaza are “post-Jihad, pro-Israel, and want to live that good life in that beautiful soil, there should be an opportunity for that,” he said. “Anti-Israel, pro-jihad Arabs have got to leave. And they’re going to have to find a different place to go. It might be Turkey, and it might be Jordan, and it might be South America,” he said. “If they can’t muster in their heart to live in or next to the Jewish state, we can’t have them.”

The Norwegian Refugee Council in December [warned](https://www.nrc.no/news/2023/december/gaza-displacement/) that “any attempts by Israel to deport and permanently displace Palestinians within and from Gaza would constitute a serious breach of international law and an atrocity crime.”

Since October 7, about 85% of Gaza’s population, or some 1.9 million people, have been displaced from their homes, according to the United Nations – many of them moved multiple times, fleeing airstrikes and heeding Israeli warnings of military attacks, and largely squeezed into a small, southwestern corner of the territory.

Israel was last week [accused of genocide](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/11/middleeast/south-africa-israel-genocide-icj-hague-day-one-intl/index.html) in Gaza by South Africa, whose lawyers argued at the International Court of Justice in The Hague that Israel’s military campaign was intended to “bring about the destruction” of its Palestinian population, and that comments made by Israeli leaders signalled their “genocidal intent.” Israel [strenuously denied the accusation](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/12/middleeast/icj-israel-gaza-hamas-genocide-hearing-hague-day-two-intl/index.html) and said that the charge was “a concerted and cynical effort to pervert the meaning of the term ‘genocide’ itself.”

**Humanitarian framing**

At the Gush Katif museum in Jerusalem, former settlers are printing T-shirts in bright orange. That color was adopted in 2004 and 2005 by the movement protesting Israel’s disengagement from Gaza. At the time, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers pulled settlers from settlement synagogues. Days later, Palestinian forces razed the buildings to the ground.

“Home, returning to Gush Katif,” the slogan on the T-shirts reads.

The movement to re-establish Gush Katif, has found a place, too, among some of the many (IDF) soldiers posting from Gaza on social media.

A photograph from a ruined Gaza street shows two soldiers holding an Israeli flag, altered to include an orange stripe and the words, in Hebrew: “Coming home!”

Another photograph shows soldiers with an orange banner that reads: “Only settlement would be considered victory!

hose advocating for renewed Israeli settlements often frame their arguments in humanitarian terms, arguing that Palestinians would have a better life elsewhere.

“This is a correct, just, moral and humane solution,” said Ben Gvir, who has previously been convicted for supporting terrorism and inciting anti-Arab racism.

Gila Gamliel, Israel’s intelligence minister and a member of Likud, suggested in November that Israel “promote the voluntary resettlement of Palestinians in Gaza, for humanitarian reasons, outside of the Strip.”

Fleisher, too, told CNN: “I would want to leave if I was in a war zone with children.”

Between 68% and 81% of buildings in northern Gaza have been damaged by Israel’s war in Gaza, according to analysis of satellite imagery up to January 5 by researchers at Oregon State University and the City University of New York. In all of Gaza, the figure is between 45% and 56%.

**‘Ethnic cleansing’**

Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, which exercises limited self-rule in the West Bank, has made clear his government’s “complete rejection of the displacement of any Palestinian citizen.”

However, the vision of voluntary emigration could “become true by default,” Omer Bartov, an Israeli-born professor of holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University, told CNN.

“Can the population now return to northern Gaza, which has largely been destroyed?”

“As a result of this, there is an opening for those ministers, media people, and so forth on the Israeli right to say, ‘Well the most humanitarian solution is to remove that population’ — or to encourage, as they say — to move out of Gaza. If that happens, then this entire scenario that I’m talking about will be seen as ethnic cleansing.”

Buttu, who said she has little doubt about the determination of some in Israel to re-settle Gaza based on their settlement efforts in the West Bank, voiced a similar concern.

Israel has “created the conditions whereby Gaza is no longer liveable,” she said. “Now they’re just simply repacking it as some sort of humanitarian gift, or humanitarian solution, when really what it is, is aiding Israel and ethnically cleansing Gaza of Palestinians.”

Netanyahu has rejected the idea of new settlements as “unrealistic,” saying in an English-language statement that “Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza or displacing its civilian population.”

In October, the Israeli government admitted that a leaked intelligence document proposing the relocation of millions of Palestinian Gazans to Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula was genuine, but downplayed its significance as “a preliminary paper, like dozens of such papers prepared by all political and security echelons.”

Nonetheless, the fact the re-settlement movement is now being openly discussed in Israel’s parliament, or Knesset, as it was during a committee hearing earlier this month, is a step-change in the debate. And despite international opprobrium, its far-right proponents are not holding back.

“We first need to occupy, to annex, to destroy all the houses there, build neighborhoods there,” Tzvi Sukkot, a member of Knesset from Smotrich’s Religious Zionism said during the committee hearing.

The only image that will convince Israel’s enemy of its defeat, said Limor Son Har Melech from Ben Gvir’s Jewish Power Party, to applause, is “the settlement, and Jewish children walking in its streets.”

Israel pledged that it will “exact a price” from Iran as the country weighs its response to an unprecedented overnight [barrage of drone and missile strikes](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/13/middleeast/iran-drones-attack-israel-intl-latam/index.html) while facing international pressure to de-escalate.

The overnight attack – which saw Tehran launch a series of strikes at Israel over a five-hour period – threatens to tip the crisis in the Middle East into an untempered regional war.

Israel’s war cabinet has been authorized to respond to the attack and met on Sunday, with one of its members, Benny Gantz, saying the “event is not over.”

He cited the need to “build a regional coalition and exact a price from Iran, in a way and at a time that suits us.”

Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant earlier said Israel had “thwarted this attack in a way that is unparalleled” but added “we must be prepared for every scenario.” In his first comments, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said “we have intercepted, we have contained. Together we shall win.”

An Israeli official separately told CNN that Israel will respond to Iran’s attack, but the scope of that attack has yet to be decided. The official said Israel is yet to determine whether to try and “break all the dishes” or do something more measured.

But Israel is being urged by Western allies to de-escalate an intensely fraught situation on Sunday and close, at least for now, a weeks-long chapter of uncertainty and confrontation that had spiraled out of Israel’s war with Hamas that has killed more than 33,000 Palestinians in Gaza and caused a humanitarian disaster in the enclave.

Iran’s retaliatory attack had been anticipated since [a suspected Israeli strike](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/middleeast/iran-response-israel-damascus-consulate-attack-intl-hnk/index.html) on an Iranian diplomatic complex in Syria earlier this month, and finally came late on Saturday when over 300 projectiles – including around 170 drones and over 120 ballistic missiles – were fired toward Israeli soil. Approximately 350 rockets were fired from Iran, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah, according to Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson Daniel Hagari. Israeli authorities said “99%” of the projectiles were intercepted with help from allies including the US, the UK and France. The only injury reported was a 7-year-old girl who was seriously wounded by shrapnel.

The reprisals brought years of clandestine conflict between the countries into the open, and marked the first time the Islamic Republic had launched a direct assault on Israel from its soil.

Israel and Iran have long been rivals, but tensions escalated in the wake of Hamas’ attacks on Israel, which left about 1,200 people dead. Iran backs a web of proxies across the Middle East that have frequently clashed with Israel since the attacks.

The war cabinet meeting lasted for hours and ended Sunday night without a decision on how Israel will respond, according to an Israeli official.

The war cabinet is determined to respond but has yet to decide on the timing and scope, the official said. One of the key dilemmas facing the cabinet is determining how quickly Israel should respond. The official said the Israeli military has been tasked with coming up with additional options for a response.

**Iran says next attack could be ‘much bigger’**

On Sunday, Iran said a “new equation” in its adversarial relationship with Israel had been opened, and warned of a “much bigger” assault on the country should Netanyahu decide on a tit-for-tat attack.

“We have decided to create a new equation, which is that if from now on the Zionist regime attacks our interests, assets, personalities, and citizens, anywhere, and at any point we will retaliate against them,” the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Hossein Salami told Iranian state TV. The “Zionist regime” is a term Iran uses to refer to Israel.

Earlier, Sardar Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, had said: “If the Zionist regime responds, our next operation will be much bigger.”

Iran’s attacks targeted the Israeli airbase from which, it said, the strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus was launched. Iranian ballistic missiles that reached Israel fell on the airbase in southern Israel, and caused only light structural damage, Hagari said.

Bagheri said that from Iran’s perspective, the military operation against Israel “has concluded.” But he emphasized that Iranian armed forces remain on high alert and are prepared to “act if necessary,” according to an interview on state IRINN TV on Sunday.

Those warnings came as Western nations urged Israel to descend from the brink of open warfare with its foe.

After the attack, US President Joe Biden spoke by phone with Netanyahu, and made clear that the US would not participate in any offensive operations against Iran, a senior White House administration official told CNN.

Biden told Netanyahu he should consider the events of Saturday night a “win” as Iran’s attacks had been largely unsuccessful, and instead [demonstrated](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-13-24/h_a122620640ce6b581caa13c116f1bc42) Israel’s “remarkable capacity to defend against and defeat even unprecedented attacks.”

Israel has told the US that it’s not “looking for a significant escalation with Iran,” a senior Biden administration told reporters Sunday.

“They’re looking to protect themselves and defend themselves,” the official said.

“The president was very clear that we’re going to help defend Israel, and he made very clear to the prime minister last night that we do have to think carefully and strategically about risks of escalation,”

Biden has meanwhile reiterated that the US’s commitment to Israel’s security against threats from Iran and its proxies remains “ironclad.”

Showing some of the domestic pressure Netanyahu faces, two hardline government ministers called for a firm response. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called for a retaliation that “resonates throughout the Middle East,” while National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir said Israel should “go crazy.”

Calls for restraint have also been made across the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, a major regional rival to Iran, stressed the importance of “preventing any further exacerbation” of the crisis, while Qatar, which enjoys close economic relations with Iran, expressed “profound concern.” The United Arab Emirates warned of “new levels of instability” if the episode was not closed.

Iran had vowed to retaliate after accusing Israel of [bombing its diplomatic complex](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/01/middleeast/syria-iranian-consulate-attack-middle-east-intl/index.html) in Syria earlier this month.

[The airstrike](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/01/middleeast/iran-syrian-consulate-attack-intl/index.html) destroyed the consulate building in the capital Damascus, killing at least seven officials including Mohammed Reza Zahedi, a top commander in Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), and senior commander Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, Iran’s foreign ministry said at the time.

Zahedi, a former commander of the IRGC’s ground forces, air force, and the deputy commander of its operations, was the most high-profile Iranian target killed since then-US President Donald Trump ordered the assassination of IRGC Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in 2020.

Dozens of Palestinian students and children staged a display of solidarity at a demonstration in southern Gaza on Sunday to express gratitude for the support seen on [US college campuses](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-palestine-04-28-24/index.html?tab=all) in recent weeks.

Video from the Shaboura refugee camp in Rafah shows children holding banners with messages that read: “Students of Columbia University, continue to stand by us” and, “Violating our right to education and life is a war crime.”

The students gathered around makeshift tents near a school that now serves as a shelter for Palestinians displaced from northern Gaza. Footage shows people spray-painting messages of gratitude on the fabric of the tents. “Thank you, students in solidarity with Gaza. Your message has reached (us),” says one of the messages.

Takfeer Abu-Yousuf, a displaced student from Beit Hanoun in Northern Gaza, told CNN from the camp he felt it was necessary to thank the students in the US who “supported us with their humanity.”

“Those are thank you messages on our tents, those tents that don’t protect us from the heat or cold. The least we can do is thank them. We can’t write these thank you messages on the walls of our homes because we have no homes. They have been destroyed on top of our children, elders, and women,”

Eighteen-year-old Rana Al-Taher pointed to the school in the camp, telling CNN that what should have been a place for learning and education has become a place for sheltering.

“That means that we have lost our education. We have lost our only hope in Gaza and we want it back. We’re here to ask for it back. It’s our right to have it back… that’s why we’re here,” she said.

According to the [UN](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1148031#:~:text=Data%20indicates%20that%2062%20schools,either%20directly%20hit%20or%20damaged.), there have been “direct hits” on more than 200 schools in Gaza since Israel’s bombardment began. The UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) has said that “no education is happening in Gaza at all for nearly six months.”

In a recent [report](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148716), UN experts decried the “systemic obliteration” of Gaza’s education system.

“The persistent, callous attacks on educational infrastructure in Gaza have a devastating long-term impact on the fundamental rights of people to learn and freely express themselves, depriving yet another generation of Palestinians of their future,” the experts said.

First-year university student Bayan Al-Fiqhi told CNN she has not been able to attend her classes at her university in Cairo since the war in Gaza began and was very appreciative to students in the US for “staging their solidarity protest.”

“We hope they add pressure on Israel and the US to stop the bloodbath that is taking place in the Gaza Strip and to prevent the invasion of Rafah,” she added.

The fate of Rafah has been hanging over the 1.3 million Palestinians displaced there. There have been weeks of speculation around when Israel might begin its anticipated military operation in the city. The UN has repeatedly warned against an Israeli ground invasion, saying an offensive “could lead to slaughter” in the southern region.

Twenty-one-year-old Nowar Diab told CNN she lamented the impact Israel’s bombardment of Gaza has had on her academic pursuits.

“I was supposed to be a graduate this year. I studied English and French literature at Al-Azhar university, but Al-Azhar university got bombarded… this war stood like a border between me and my dreams and the beginning of my career,” she said.

“Today I am standing here to tell the whole world that we, Gazan students, go through pain and we suffer every single day,” she added.

Diab said that despite the brutality of Israel’s war, the resilience and determination of Gazan students to persevere was clear for the world to see.

**Prayers for peace**

Elsewhere in Gaza, dozens of Palestinian Christians celebrated Orthodox Palm Sunday by attending mass at the Church of Saint Porphyrius, the oldest in Gaza City, and praying for peace.

Videos show men, women, children, and the elderly singing prayers inside the church, asking for peace to prevail over Gaza. Children are seen dressed up, carrying flowers and candles, and playing in the churchyard decorated with palm trees.

Gaza City resident Khader Nasrawi, who attended the church celebrations, told CNN he is hoping for a “better tomorrow.”

“We are celebrating the holiday this year while there is a lump in our hearts and wounds for the loss of our loved ones and our homes throughout this brutal war…We are asking for the world to give us peace because we are peace-loving people. Jesus Christ called for peace and love, as did all other religions,” he added.

Another resident, Ihab Ayad, told CNN he was injured by an Israeli airstrike that hit the [church’s campus](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-20-23/h_144c4c17944bdd881e21ef361491235c) [in October last year](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-20-23/h_144c4c17944bdd881e21ef361491235c).

Ayab said despite what he’s been through, he remains “united and steadfast” with his Palestinian community.

“This holiday is different for us, because of the tragedy of the war that the Palestinian people have suffered from, whether they are Christian or Muslim. The occupation doesn’t distinguish between Christian or Muslim, it is a criminal assault,” he said.

Not too far away from the church, residents and eyewitnesses told CNN an Israeli airstrike Sunday hit a four-story residential building in the Yarmouk neighborhood in Gaza City. They said the Israeli military gave them a warning before the strike, and there were no casualties.

Palestinians and [Israeli](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/20/world/israel-bennett-temple-mount-gaza-intl/index.html) security forces clashed early Thursday around the entrance to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem’s Old City and [Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/20/middleeast/israel-government-fragility-jerusalem-violence-mime-intl/index.html) responded to rockets fired from Gaza with airstrikes, as the worst tensions in months continued to simmer.

Videos showed dozens of Israeli police on the compound outside the mosque just after sunrise Thursday as Palestinians launched fireworks towards them from inside the building. Other videos showed police firing stun grenades.

Later, at around 7:30 a.m., a group of Jewish visitors entered the compound, many of them in religious clothing, protected by Israeli security forces.

The hilltop site is holy to both Muslims and Jews and has been a flashpoint for decades. Jews call it the Temple Mount and revere it as the place where the first and second temples stood. Muslims refer to it as the Haram al Sharif and believe it is the place from where the prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven.

Since 1967, arrangements have been governed by a ‘status quo’ understanding, which allows only Muslims to pray on the site, though anyone is allowed to visit during certain hours. In an effort to reduce tensions, and in line with similar Israeli government decisions in recent years, from today there will be no further visits by Jewish groups until the end of Ramadan - in about ten days’ time.

“In common with recent days, this morning, at the end of the dawn prayer, dozens of lawbreakers and masked men rioted and disturbed the order on the Temple Mount, with severe violence,” an Israeli police statement said Thursday.

Police described the recent throwing of fireworks from inside the mosque, at least one of which caused a small fire in a carpet, as an act of desecration. Accusations that the Al-Aqsa mosque is being abased are regularly hurled between the two sides, with Palestinians and others saying Israeli security forces defile the building when they set foot inside it.

Israel blames Hamas for inciting Palestinians over the mosque, and believes the militant group is weighing-up whether to escalate the conflict over Gaza as well. On Thursday night, at least five rockets were fired from the coastal enclave towards Israel. The Israeli military said most were intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system.

Israeli warplanes carried out subsequent air-strikes on Hamas targets in Gaza, the military said. One strike hit the entrance to an underground facility involved in the manufacture of rocket engines, it said. There are no reports from Gaza of any injuries.

Earlier, on Wednesday evening, tensions in Jerusalem spiked when Jewish nationalists, led by extremist lawmaker Itamar Ben Gvir, attempted to march towards the Damascus Gate, one of the main entrances to the Old City used by Palestinians.

Police had refused to grant a permit for the march and succeeded in preventing the main group of mostly young men from getting to the Gate, but later there were minor clashes on the Old City’s narrow streets between Jewish nationalists, local Palestinians and Israeli police.

In one video, a group of nationalists breaks into a chant of “Death to Arabs” as they surround Palestinian men at a food stall and start pushing them around.

The city has been on edge for the last week with periodic clashes breaking out on or around the Al-Aqsa mosque compound. Friday saw the most serious unrest when more than 150 Palestinians were injured, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent, along with several police. None of the injuries were life-threatening, reports suggested.

The 10-month-old Israeli coalition government is facing its deepest political crisis to date, after weeks of high-profile attacks across Israel, military action in the West Bank, and after Israeli police entered and arrested hundreds at one of [Jerusalem’s](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/15/middleeast/jerusalem-violence-intl/index.html) holiest sites.

From its inception, the coalition government had a razor thin margin, made up of a [historically diverse](https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/02/middleeast/israel-coalition-deal-intl/index.html) lineup of political parties from the far left to the right wing, including the first Arab party to be an active member of a government coalition.

Because of that diverse makeup, the government said early on that it had no intention of tackling the most contentious issues in Israeli politics. But escalations in recent weeks have placed those issues front and center.

Its one-seat majority in parliament was lost [earlier this month](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/06/middleeast/israel-coalition-majority-lost-intl/index.html) when Idit Silman, a member of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s own party, defected. The move sent political shockwaves throughout Israel but did not necessarily mean the current government would collapse, especially since the opposition, led by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, doesn’t have the numbers for a majority itself.

But that could be changing. In recent days, during commemorations of both Passover and Ramadan, Israeli police say they arrested more than 300 people at the al-Aqsa mosque compound, where police say people throwing rocks and launching fireworks were jeopardizing safe worship. The Palestinian Red Crescent said scores of people were injured by rubber bullets, stun grenades, and police batons. The presence of Israeli police inside the mosque itself became a flashpoint, as it is regarded as offensive to Muslims and puts a strain on a decades-old “status quo” agreement about the site. In response, the United Arab List party, also known by its acronym Ra’am, suspended its membership in the coalition to protest what it said was Israeli police violence at the holy site that is sacred to both Jews and Muslims.

“If the government continues its steps against Al-Quds and its people, Al-Aqsa, its worshipers and its sanctuaries in this holy month, we will submit a collective resignation, and we call on all parties to cooperate with and support this decision,” party members said in a statement.

For the moment, the action has no immediate consequences – Israel’s parliament, the Knesset, is in recess for a few more weeks and by the time it returns, the party could decide to sit with the coalition once again.

But if even just one member of the UAL party defects from the coalition, Netanyahu could potentially have the numbers in hand to call for a vote to dissolve parliament and trigger new elections, giving him a pathway back to power.

Never before in Israeli history has the fate of a government been in the hands of an Arab, non-Jewish party. Without UAL’s support, [the coalition](https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/14/opinions/israel-coalition-mansour-abbas-david/index.html) would never have taken power. And even before joining the government, party leader Mansour Abbas had said that while he’s a proud member of the government with the aim of improving the lives of the approximately 20% of Israel’s population that identifies as Arab, he has his own “red lines” – though it remains unclear exactly where those lines are.

“I said and I continue to say that the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque is a red line in which there is no compromise,” Abbas wrote in a Facebook post last week. “This is what I conveyed today in my conversation with the officials with whom I communicated, and I explained to them my position.”

Apart from Abbas’ vaunted leverage in the governing coalition, there are other officials whose influence may be moderating the response of Israeli police. as well. Israeli Minister of Public Security Omer Bar Lev is a member of the left-leaning Labor Party. And Defense Minister Benny Gantz has pushed forward increasing the number of work permits, believing that giving Palestinians more economic opportunity will bring more calm.

In Jerusalem, Israeli officials believe they have shown restraint in policing tactics on Palestinians around the mosque and Old City. Israeli media report police have been more reserved in their responses during clashes than in previous incidents and haven’t employed the kind of tactics that inflamed tensions during Ramadan last year, like barring people from gathering at the Damascus Gate plaza.

Israeli officials emphasized that even after the worst of the clashes on Friday, more than 50,000 Muslim worshippers attended prayers at the compound peacefully, although at various points since then Muslim worshippers were blocked from Al Aqsa as police accompanied Jewish groups and foreign tourists on scheduled visits.

The compound is often a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It lies in East Jerusalem, which most of the international community regards as having been under Israeli occupation since 1967. Israel disputes that and claims all of Jerusalem as its undivided capital, while Palestinians want the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

This Ramadan, Israeli restrictions on movement of Palestinians between the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem have not been as tight as before for those with Israeli-issued permits.

At the same time though, Israel has launched raids across the West Bank in response to Palestinian attacks, and 14 Palestinians have died since late March in clashes with Israeli security forces or been shot dead by Israeli soldiers for allegedly throwing Molotov cocktails or [running towards](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/13/middleeast/mideast-summary-04-13-2022-intl/index.html) soldiers at a checkpoint.

The real test for the Israeli government will come in early May, when parliament comes back into session. That is when the true fragility of their position will be made clear.

**Other top Middle East news**

**Watchdog claims Middle East states, others spied on UK government**

Digital rights watchdog group Citizen Lab said on Monday it had warned British officials that electronic devices connected to government networks, including some inside the prime minister’s office and foreign ministry, appeared to be infected with Israeli-made spy software. It said the government was targeted by the United Arab Emirates, Cyprus, Jordan and India.

* *Background*: The spy software allegedly used is known as Pegasus, a product of Israeli cyber arms dealer NSO Group. An NSO spokesperson told Reuters the allegations were “false.” A British government spokesperson refused to comment on security matters, and government spokespeople for the UAE, Jordan and India didn’t immediately respond to requests for comment. Cyprus authorities “categorically” denied involvement to Reuters.
* *Why it matters:* Both Jordan and the UAE enjoy good relations with the UK and the allegations are likely to embarrass them.

**UAE summons Israeli ambassador to protest Jerusalem violence**

The UAE foreign ministry summoned the Israeli ambassador to protest the treatment of Palestinians in Jerusalem by Israeli forces, the foreign ministry said in a statement on Tuesday.

* *Background*: More than 150 people were injured in clashes with Israeli police on Friday, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent. The Emirati minister of state for international cooperation Reem Al Hashimi told Israel’s ambassador Amir Hayek that the UAE “strongly protests” attacks on “civilians and incursions into holy places,” the statement added.
* *Why it matters:* Since spearheading a wave of Arab normalization agreements with the Jewish state in 2020, this is the first time the UAE has summoned Israel’s envoy.

**Turkey arrests journalist over posts on personal information leak**

Turkish authorities jailed a journalist on Tuesday pending trial after he announced hackers had stolen personal information from government websites and shared some of it with him, including President Tayyip Erdogan’s ID card, as proof, his lawyer said.

* *Background*: The independent journalist, Ibrahim Haskologlu, posted the announcement on Twitter, illustrating it with a partially obscured photo of what he said was Erdogan’s ID. His lawyer, Emrah Karatay, said his client was arrested on a charge of illegally obtaining and disseminating personal information due to his social media posts.
* *Why it matters:* As well as sharing the purported photo of Erdogan’s ID, Haskologlu also published an image of what he said was the ID card of Hakan Fidan, head of Turkey’s National Intelligence Agency. Most of the information on the cards was concealed. Turkey is one of the world’s top jailers of journalists and mainstream media is controlled by those close to Erdogan’s government

his Ramadan, drama went beyond the screen with the premiere of television series “From the pyramid road to…” about a love triangle that involves a sultry Egyptian woman and a Kuwaiti couple.

The Saudi state-owned channel MBC’s broadcast of the Kuwaiti family drama is raising eyebrows in the Kuwaiti government and as far away as Egypt.

Written by Kuwaiti writer Hiba Hamada, the show follows the struggle between Abla, a doctor and wife of a wealthy Kuwaiti, and an Egyptian belly dancer trying to drive a wedge between them for self-interest. Kareema, the dancer, is hired to perform at the wedding of Abla’s son. After the celebrations, she is unable to return home and stays at Abla’s family home, where she tries to seduce her husband.

The show touches on topics deemed controversial in Kuwait such as gender roles and relations and has prompted accusations of stereotyping on social media. In one scene, Abla is shown lecturing her son about men’s perceptions of women’s clothing, saying women will be harassed in Kuwait no matter what they wear. Egyptians took issue with the portrayal of Egyptian women as dancers chasing after wealthy men from the Gulf.

The controversy led the Kuwaiti ministry of information to distance itself from the show, saying on Twitter that it “is not produced by a Kuwaiti company, has been filmed outside Kuwait, and is broadcast on platforms outside of Kuwait.” While the show was filmed in the UAE, the ministry said it will launch an investigation into any scenes that may have been filmed within Kuwait without a permit.A series of terror attacks and violent incidents have put Israel and the Palestinian territories on edge again.

In just one week, 11 people were killed in three attacks in Israeli towns and cities. It was the deadliest week Israel had seen in years and follows weeks of rising tensions that saw Israelis targeted in stabbing attacks and several Palestinians shot dead by Israeli forces in the West Bank.

The overlap of three major religious holidays over the next month – Ramadan, Passover and Easter – could heighten tensions further, exacerbating a potent mix of factors that could spark yet another cycle of violence.

Here are five things you need to know about the recent uptick in violence.

Attacks hit deep in Israel

The lethal attacks took place not in the typical hot spots, disputed areas like Jerusalem or the West Bank, much of which is considered by the international community to be occupied territory. Instead they happened in Israeli towns and cities that are not used to such violence.

Unusually, two of the attacks were carried out by Israeli-Arabs. On March 22, an Israeli-Arab killed four Israeli civilians in a stabbing and ramming attack in the southern city of Be’er Sheva, Israeli police said. The attacker had previously been imprisoned for supporting ISIS.

On Sunday, two Israeli-Arab men killed two border police officers and wounded six passersby in the northern city of Hadera, local media reported. The two were also affiliated with ISIS, which claimed responsibility for the incident – the first such ISIS claim for an attack in Israel since 2017.

Then on Tuesday night, a Palestinian from the West Bank shot and killed five people in Bnei Brak, a mostly Orthodox city just east of Tel Aviv. Two of those killed were Ukrainian citizens, two were Israeli civilians and one was a police officer who responded to the scene, according to Israeli police. In all three cases the attackers were shot and killed by either civilians or security forces.**Tensions rising in the West Bank and Jerusalem**

Tensions had already been on the rise for weeks, even before the three attacks. There had been several stabbings carried out by Palestinians against Israelis in Jerusalem in March and several Palestinians, including teenagers, had been shot dead by Israeli forces in the West Bank during clashes over the past several weeks.

The security situation is escalating. While many of the recent attacks targeted police or military forces within Jerusalem’s Old City, the most recent stabbing targeted an Israeli out for a jog in a popular neighborhood outside the Old City. Two of the three attacks in the past week targeted civilians.

The cycle of violence has continued since then. On Thursday, two Palestinians – including one teenager – were killed and 15 others wounded during an Israeli police raid in the West Bank city of Jenin targeting suspects connected to the Bnei Brak shooting. The family home of the attacker has also been scheduled for demolition, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said, a standard practice by Israeli forces to “create deterrence” (the Israeli Army says families can try to appeal demolitions).

A few hours later, an Israeli was stabbed on a bus in the West Bank just south of Bethlehem. The attacker, a Palestinian, was shot dead by an armed civilian on the bus, the Israeli military said.

And for months, Palestinian and Israeli activists have warned that violence against Palestinians carried out by Israeli setters is at an all-time high. Israel’s Defense Minister Benny Gantz has vowed to treat settler violence with a “heavy hand,” calling perpetrators “terrorists” and promising special military teams that are supposed to help monitor areas where clashes tend to erupt – although most Palestinians are already wary of the Israeli military, saying they believe they only help protect settlers.

**PM calls on civilians to carry firearms as Israel goes on high alert**

Israel’s security alert status has been raised to its highest level. That means police are much more visible on the streets, working longer shifts and focusing their presence on schools and popular gathering spots.

Troop presence in the West Bank hand around the Gaza strip has also increased, with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announcing they are adding 14 battalions and combat soldiers from special forces units. Soldiers who carry a certain class of weapon will also be required to take their weapons with them even while on leave,

Bennett has also made the unusual call to all civilians with a license to carry a firearm to now keep their guns on them at all times, saying Israelis need to be “alert.”

“Open your eyes. Whoever has a license to carry a weapon, this is the time to carry it,” he said in a video statement Wednesday.

**Palestinian militant groups mobilize**

Palestinian militant groups have praised the attacks and called for further action, especially in reaction to raids in the West Bank and violence from Jewish settlers.

Hamas, the militant group that controls Gaza, said in a statement: “The continuous crimes of the occupation portend a comprehensive explosion, which will be more powerful and more painful, in which our people will be involved in all parts of our occupied land.”

Abu Hamza, the military spokesman for the Al-Quds Brigades of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, announced “the raising of full readiness among our fighters in all military formations.”

Behind tables laden with more than 50 assault rifles, Israel’s far-right national security minister, Itamar Ben Gvir, smiled at a crowd of people who had come to the coastal city of Caesarea for a ceremony to receive the firearms.

The divisive politician has been crisscrossing Israel in the past weeks handing out guns to civilian members of security squads as he expands Israeli citizens’ access to guns in the wake of Hamas’ attack last month. The aim, according to the Ministry of National Security, is to create teamsto respond to future terror incidents.

The successes of some volunteer security units in southern Israel, who [were able](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/middleeast/hamas-documents-invs/index.html) to push Hamas gunmen back on October 7 in certain locales, have attracted new members to the initiative.

The Israeli government says around [700 volunteer](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/telaviv_211) security squads, which will operate under the command of Israeli police, have been established since then, tapping into the wellspring of insecurity in the country following Hamas militants’ massacre of an estimated 1,200 people in Israel that day.

“We saw this in the first days of the war, wherever there were weapons, the scale of the disaster was smaller,” Ben Gvir said in a [press release](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/telaviv_211).

Critics see it as part of a far-right vision to inflame Israeli-Palestinian relations in the country, especially in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Ben Gvir, who leads the Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, pledged to give 10,000 guns to towns and cities across Israel, including Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territory, according to the New York Times.

“Weapons will be distributed to squads all around the country, with an emphasize on near- border fence communities in the north and south, mixed cities and settlements in Judea and Samaria,” Ben Gvir’s office said in a statement shared by the Jewish Power party and seen by CNN which used the biblical names for the West Bank.

Palestinians fear these guns will be used against them. Mariam Barghouti, a Palestinian writer and policy analyst, described Ben Gvir’s pledge as “green lighting an intensification of killing Palestinians ­– although that has consistently been the reality in the West Bank,” she told CNN.

Violence has spiked in the West Bank since Israel declared war on Hamas last month and at least 176 Palestinians [have since](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/10/middleeast/palestinians-killed-west-bank-jenin-israel-incursion-hnk-intl/index.html) been killed by Israeli forces or Jewish settlers, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

The United Nations and many foreign countries consider the West Bank and East Jerusalem as occupied land and therefore view Israeli settlements there as illegal under international law. But Israel says the status of the West Bank is disputed and denies its settlements there are illegal; while it regards all of Jerusalem as sovereign Israeli territory. Some in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s cabinet, such as Ben Gvir and far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, [support](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/21/middleeast/arab-israeli-citizens-cmd-intl/index.html) annexing the West Bank.

Abdelathim Wadi, who lives in Qusra, south of the West Bank city of Nablus, lost his brother and nephew to an attack by armed settlers as they made their way to a funeral for four [other Palestinians](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/17/west-bank-violence-becky-anderson-cnc-intl-vpx.cnn), he said.

“There’s no one to defend us… Our movement is so restricted, we’re constantly living in fear that if we leave our house, we’ll be shot,” he said.

When CNN

In a later statement to CNN, Ben Gvir said “forming and arming the security squads will increase the probability that many Israeli families” will survive a similar attack to the one on October 7.

It added that the Israel Defense Forces is “the one responsible for arming and forming the squads in Judaea & Samaria,” and not the police under Ben Gvir.

“And to be clear, the minister’s vision and acts are to provide security to the citizens of Israel, (if) his views were met in the months prior the massacre, the present day could have been different and safer,” the statement added.

**‘Causing chaos’**

Ben Gvir, who has previously been convicted for supporting terrorism and inciting [anti-Arab racism](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/03/middleeast/israel-palestinians-jerusalem-ben-gvir-intl/index.html), loomed on the edges of the Israeli far-right before his party and other [extremist](https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/28/middleeast/netanyahu-comeback-extremists-mime-intl/index.html) figures shored up Netanyahu’s ruling coalition – the most right-wing in Israel’s history.

Ben Gvir’s party draws its core support from Israeli settlers in the West Bank. Last week, Heritage Minister Amichay Eliyahu, who is in Ben Gvir’s party, suggested that dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza could be “one way” for Israel to deal with Hamas. Eliyahu said later he did not mean his answer to be taken literally.

Outside the sports hall, where the ceremony was taking place in Caesarea, a small group of demonstrators gathered against Ben Gvir’s arrival in their neighborhood. Amid chants of “fascist,” protester Roy Malkan accused the minister of “provoking the situation in the West Bank,” and “hoping for riots from the Israeli Palestinians,”

Others against the mass distribution of arms believe the government should be shoring up the police force and the military instead, and not risk weapons [falling into the wrong](https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2023-11-09/ty-article/0000018b-adc7-d724-a5bb-edff93a70000) hands.

In a video shared on Ben Gvir’s [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/ibengvir/videos/1547627752734532), controversial far-right rapper Yoav Eliasi was seen being embraced by the politician after he received a rifle at a Tel Aviv security squad weapons ceremony.

“The rapper for years has incited against Palestinians, against activists, and he also incited against me personally,” Ori Givati, a former tank commander for the Israeli military and advocacy director of NGO Breaking the Silence, told CNN. He adds that arming people like that “is only showing what he (Ben Gvir) is trying to cause, which is chaos.”

CNN has reached out to Eliasi for comment. He addressed [criticism](https://news.walla.co.il/item/3621999) of him in a November 12 post on Instagram, saying: “I am certified and trained by the police.”

**‘Go, arm yourself’**

In addition to the hundreds of new volunteer units, Ben Gvir has [called on individuals to](https://twitter.com/itamarbengvir/status/1715307290255868100) “go, arm yourself.” Shooting ranges and gun stores in Israel have seen an increase in foot traffic as private gun licensing rules were relaxed by Ben Gvir in recent weeks, [Reuters reported](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/aghast-hamas-killings-israelis-buy-up-guns-with-governments-blessing-2023-10-26/).

A [press release](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/news_0910) by the Ministry of National Security said that [Hebrew-speaking](https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/General/firearm-licensing-information) citizens who have military training, no criminal record, and live in an eligible area “can undergo a telephone interview instead of an in-person one, and be issued a firearm license within a week.”

A 2017 report from the [Small Arms Survey](https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf), a Swiss nonprofit tracking global firearms holdings, found civilians owned approximately 557,000 registered and unregistered guns in Israel, or 6.7 guns per 100 people – a [tiny fraction](https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/26/world/us-gun-culture-world-comparison-intl-cmd/index.html) of America’s 120 guns per 100 people. Israeli officials in October estimated that at least [300,000 Israelis](https://main.knesset.gov.il/activity/committees/internalsecurity/news/pages/%d7%aa%d7%a7%d7%a0%d7%95%d7%aa-%d7%9b%d7%9c%d7%99-%d7%99%d7%a8%d7%99%d7%99%d7%94-16.10.23.aspx) would be eligible for the new licenses.

Guy Ben-Porat, a politics professor at Israel’s Ben-Gurion University, told CNN that while he does not want to discount the fear of the wider Israeli population, who “feel that they have been neglected by the military and the government and the instinct is to demand weapons,” he believes Ben Gvir has been “exploiting the opportunity to promote what he has wanted for a long time” that is “arming Jewish civilians.”

What the country needs is a reduction in arms, he said, pointing to the issue of illegal guns fueling gang-related violence among [Arab citizens of Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/08/middleeast/israel-arab-citizens-crime-mime-intl/index.html). The community – which makes up 20% of the population – [has been calling](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/arabs-israel-protest-unchecked-crime-netanyahu-vows-crackdown-2023-08-23/) for more measures to help curb criminal violence to deaf years, according to Ben-Porat.

“There’s a gun culture because people are insecure, so they buy guns, and every local feud can turn into a gun battle,” Ben-Porat, who is also an expert on minority policing, said. “However, the answer is not to give guns to Jewish citizens, but to take the guns away.

Security squad members at the Caesarea event believe the opposite, telling CNN that the process is regulated with a background check and proof of prior military experience. Those with prior police, national or civil service experience, or an exemption, is also accepted, according to a volunteer sign-up sheet. A large proportion of Israelis have undergone mandatory military service: Israel’s [October call](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/israel-ground-invasion-gaza-reservists-intl/index.html) for 300,000 reservists, despite having a population 34 times smaller than the US, is nearly equal to the total size of the US’s military reserves.

One of the new recruits, educator Liat Eisner, stressed it was pragmatism that led her to join the volunteer security unit. “We are not fanatics. We’re not crazy for guns. We are concerned citizens who are not willing to be butchered again,” she said.

Eisner said she’s no fan of Israeli politics and previously protested Netanyahu’s attempt at [judicial reform](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/11/middleeast/israel-judicial-reforms-protests-intl/index.html). But her priorities have changed since the start of Israel’s war with Hamas.

“Listen, I’m not going to sit like a duck waiting for someone to slaughter me,” she said while filling a rifle magazine with bullets outside the event. “The only thing is us – we have to win (against Hamas). This is survival.”

As three pistol-holding Jewish women aligned their muzzles with the outdoor targets at the Magen Am gun range in Piru, California, one of the shooters-in-training – Dani, a granddaughter to Holocaust survivors on both sides of her family – fired a single shot.

“Whoa,” Dani said as her earmuffed head tilted slightly back after the bullet pierced the cardboard, as if amazed at the power of the weapon she gripped.

“Good, finger off the trigger, go ahead and put it down,” said the firearms instructor teaching the women how to defend themselves amid the recent spike in antisemitic incidents as the Israel-Hamas war unfolds in the Middle East.

With threats against American Jews on the rise, many have begun seeking firearms training and purchasing weapons out of fear for the safety of their communities and families, according to interviews CNN has conducted with gun range operators, firearms instructors and Jews in the US in recent days.

The Anti-Defamation League said it recorded [312 antisemitic incidents](https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/adl-records-dramatic-increase-us-antisemitic-incidents-following-oct-7) across the United States over the first three weeks after the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas broke out, including instances of harassment and assault.

A person making death threats to Jewish people near a kosher restaurant; a [Jewish-owned business vandalized](https://www.adl.org/stand-with-israel?utm_campaign=irshamatt2023&utm_medium=pr&utm_content=20231025) with anti-Israel phrases; and a driver swerving toward Jewish children while shouting, “Allahu akbar” are among the recent hate-related encounters, according to the league.

Several of those occurred [throughout Southern California](https://www.adl.org/stand-with-israel?utm_campaign=irshamatt2023&utm_medium=pr&utm_content=20231025), where Dani lives.

“Now more than ever with the rise in antisemitism, I feel we have a responsibility as Jews to speak up and speak out, and also know how to protect ourselves because the reality is people don’t seem to want us around, and it’s hard,” Dani, who declined to share her last name for her safety, told CNN.

Some gun range operators and firearms instructors throughout the country have noted more Jewish people looking for ways to protect themselves with guns – either for the first time or to inquire about obtaining additional weapons, experts say.

Gene Petrino, a retired SWAT commander in Coral Springs, Florida, told CNN he’s gotten roughly 15 to 20 Jewish people per week seeking training since the war broke out.

“They want to know about situational awareness and how they can learn to spot a threat before an attack occurs,” said Petrino, who co-owns Survival Response LLC, a company offering workplace violence prevention, active shooter and firearms training.

He says the Jewish people he’s worked with are prioritizing not only buying a gun, but learning how to use them safely.

A rise in American Jewish gun ownership would come as a noticeable shift for a group that is historically liberal and a majority of which are registered Democrats.

“I’m definitely finding that to be the case with the Jewish community right now, they will take lessons and understand the safety, how they function and what they can and can’t do,” Petrino said.

“They’re making sure they have what’s practical, what’s needed based on their own set of circumstances,” he said. “They’re very pragmatic in (how) they’re going about this.”

The desire for gun training and ownership differs from the usual views on firearms in the Jewish community, according to Mark K., a Jewish photographer in Houston who owns two guns and requested CNN not reveal his full last name for safety.

“I’m actually surprised to hear that other Jewish people have guns,” Mark told CNN.

“In terms of the Jewish community overall, I know most people do not own guns just because most Jews are liberal and want gun control,” he said.

A 2018 American Jewish Committee poll showed [70% of Jewish respondents](https://www.ajc.org/news/survey2018) thought it was more important to control gun ownership than to protect Americans’ rights to own guns.

The US government does not keep official statistics on gun ownership, including demographic information. Research from industry groups like the National Shooting Sports Foundation break down gun ownership by race and gender but not by religious affiliation. The Pew Research Center’s demographics include age, gender, party affiliation, urban/rural residency and education but not religion.

**Gun ownership brings ‘sense of comfort’ for some Jews**

A poll conducted last week by the Jewish Federations of North America found Jews were roughly twice as likely as non-Jewish people to say they’ve been worried about their safety in the past month, according to data shared with CNN.

Mark K. says he’s among those concerned. He had not regularly carried his concealed weapon since his business was robbed in 2015, which is why he initially began carrying. Heightened antisemitism over the past month has changed that, he said.

“I wish I didn’t have to have the weapon on me. That makes me nervous as it is, just having a weapon on me. I don’t like to keep it on me. I’m certainly more aware of my surroundings because of the weapon that’s on me.”

While he’s relieved by the added security measures at his local Jewish Community Center, he’s still worried when he goes out for lunch with his elderly mother, Mark shared.

He doesn’t think anyone can tell he or his mother are Jewish by looking at them, but noted his mom wears a Star of David.

In his metro area community of [approximately 51,000 Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/largest-jewish-populated-metropolitan-areas-united-states), he says he “was never nervous about being Jewish in Houston,” where he’s lived since the late 1970s.

“And now I am,” he said.

Daniel, a resident of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, who only wanted his first name used, said he was waiting for the firearm he purchased last week to arrive at the shooting range he’d recently visited.

“As soon as it’s delivered, I’ll pick it up,” said Daniel, who’s lived in the South Florida city for the past eight or so years.

The spike in violence and hateful rhetoric has evoked fears within the Jewish community of another Holocaust, according to Daniel.

In the decades prior to Nazi Germany’s systematic extermination of Jews, Germany had and its religious freedom laws served as a safe haven for its massive Jewish population – in much the same way American Jews have considered the United States for over a century. The rise in antisemitic attacks have worried many American Jews that history may be repeating itself.

Hamas’ October 7 attack against Israel represented the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust.

“I think a lot of people were hoping that we were past that – I know I definitely was – but I think current events have shown us that may be coming, and that there is that type of hate in the world,” he said. “It’s very scary.”

He’d never before felt the need to be armed, but says he’s changed his sentiments in light of recent events.

Daniel’s relatives, who live in Los Angeles, said they heard about a burglary in the city that concerned them.

“I think the level of hate has really kind of heightened it to a sense of, ‘I need to make sure I can protect my family,’” Daniel said.

“What’s triggered them is there was a break-in recently into somebody’s home, and the guy was spewing all this hate speech, and like, ‘No, never again,’ was in their minds immediately,” he said, referring to the Jewish community’s refusal ever to be genocide victims again.

Daniel’s relatives in Los Angeles recently experienced a break-in in their neighborhood, he said.

The “ultimate sense of comfort” Daniel says he’ll feel with owning a gun brings with it the unease of handling a lethal weapon. Knowing how to use it responsibly, he shared, is something he doesn’t take lightly.

“There’s a sense of responsibility that comes with that,” he said. “I would definitely, 100%, intend to continue to do weapons training courses and go to the shooting range on a regular basis so I can use it effectively, and not harm anybody I don’t intend to harm.”

**Firearms classes at ‘four or five times the size’**

In Rockland County, New York, the founder of the New York State Jewish Gun Club told CNN he’s trying hard to keep up with the increase in demand for training.

“I’m getting extra help, to help answer the phone, to reply to the emails and to make sure that everyone is serviced,” said Tzvi Waldman, who started the club in 2017 to unify Jewish gun owners.

Their club normally offers a firearms class needed for obtaining a pistol permit about once or twice monthly for around 12 people, Waldman said.

“Since what happened in Israel, we have done three classes at probably four or five times the size,” he said.

Waldman explained Jewish views on gun ownership vary on a spectrum, with Orthodox Hasidic Jews more conservative and leaning toward social issues and family values, and other Jewish people who share more left-leaning political views.

“There is a notion out there that Jews are anti guns, but in reality, at least in my community, I think the Second Amendment is very strong over here,” Waldman said. “What happened in Israel was like a rude awakening for people that no matter where you are on the spectrum in Judaism, you’re hated the same.”

He’s been shocked, he shared, at the type of people joining his classes recently – people who were previously unaccepting of guns as a means of safety who now see the value in it, he said.

The recent visitors explaining why they want to learn to shoot have voiced their safety concerns with fear and worry over handling a deadly weapon, according to Waldman.

“It’s coming from a level of anxiety. … They want to make sure that they know how to use it and that they know which one to get,” Waldman said.

“A lot of people are scared of it, but it’s either that or death, and they would rather learn something that they were uncomfortable with and to know that they’re safe,”

 FBI Director Christopher Wray said Tuesday [that antisemitism is reaching “historic levels”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/31/politics/antisemitism-unstable-world-analysis/index.html) in the United States.

“This is a threat that is reaching, in some way, sort of historic levels,” Wray said during a Senate hearing Tuesday. The FBI director said that was in part because “the Jewish community is targeted by terrorists really across the spectrum” including homegrown violent extremists, foreign terrorist organizations, and domestic violent extremists.

“In fact, our statistics would indicate that for a group that represents only about 2.4% of the American public, they account for something like 60% of all religious-based hate crimes,”

Wray said that the FBI is tackling the rise in antisemitism through a series of law enforcement efforts including joint terrorism task forces, hate crime investigations, and intelligence sharing.

“This is not a time for panic, but it is a time for vigilance,” Wray said addressing public fear over the rise in hate crimes. “We shouldn’t stop conducting our daily lives – going to schools, houses of worship, and so forth – but we should be vigilant.”“You often hear the expression if you see something, say something – that’s never been more true than now,” Wray said. “And that’s probably partly why the American people are reporting more tips and leads to us, and we’re pursuing those threats and leads as vigorously and responsibly as we can.

Dr. Mohammed Ghneim has not left his hospital in Gaza City in four weeks. He can’t remember the last time he slept or ate, and his blue scrubs are stained in the blood of patients who’ve died in his arms.

His voice cracks under the weight of the horrors he’s seen: fetuses pulled from the wombs of dying mothers, children with crushed lungs struggling to breathe, and his own colleagues – doctors, nurses and EMTs – transported to the hospital morgue in body bags.

“We are doing our best – this is why we haven’t left here for days – but the situation is very horrible. There’s no way to describe it in any language or with any words,” Ghneim told CNN in a voice message on November 7, as sounds of chaos and panic unfolded around him. “Many times I want to go to the side and cry, but unfortunately there is no time.”

Ghneim is an emergency room doctor at Dar Al-Shifa, also known as Al-Shifa Hospital or Shifa, and is Arabic for “house of healing.” But at this hospital – the largest medical complex in Gaza – there’s far too much death.

Shifa is running dangerously low on clean water, medicine, supplies and fuel. Meanwhile, thousands of Palestinians, injured or displaced by Israel’s war against Hamas, continue to pack its wards, seeking shelter from the [seemingly endless barrage of airstrikes.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/gaza-airstrikes-warnings-invs/index.html)

Israeli forces on Saturday surrounded Shifa in all directions, threatening the health and safety of those inside, according to Dr. Munir Al-Bursh, director-general of the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza.

An Israeli airstrike destroyed the hospital’s generator, Al-Bursh said, cutting electricity to the building, including life-saving equipment used by 39 infants in neonatal care. [Three infants have already died](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/11/middleeast/babies-die-neonatal-gaza-hospital-complete-siege), he added.

The Israeli military denied that the hospital is under siege, telling CNN it was engaged in “ongoing intense fighting” against Hamas in the vicinity of Shifa, but declined to comment further on its forces’ proximity to the complex because military activity was still underway. Israel has accused Hamas of using hospitals as cover — a charge doctors at Shifa and the militant group deny.

“We are trained to deal with mass casualties, but not like this,” Ghneim, 28, said. “We have no anesthesia to treat patients with severe pain, patients with shrapnel in their head or abdomen, people whose arms or legs have been amputated.”

Alarming scenes from inside Shifa, and other hospitals across Gaza, have sparked international calls for a ceasefire and more aid to be allowed to enter the territory, home to some 2 million Palestinians, currently closed off to the world by Israel and Egypt.

Nonprofit medical groups across the United States are mobilizing to raise funds and ship medicine and supplies to failing hospitals before it’s too late. But with the situation in Gaza spiraling and few diplomatic or humanitarian solutions in sight, many worry the delay will result in more deaths.

“I want to say to the world, this is a humanitarian crisis, this is a genocide,” Ghneim pleaded from his crowded emergency room. “Please stop this.”

**‘Desperate to send help’**

More than 7,000 miles away, in Houston, Mosab Nasser is making travel plans to visit communities where he can spread awareness about the situation in Gaza and raise funds for struggling hospitals.

The proud Texan, born and raised in Gaza, says it’s all he’s been doing since October 7, when Israel [declared war](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/28/middleeast/israel-hamas-war-one-month-explainer-mime-intl/index.html) following a brazen attack by Hamas that killed around 1,200 people and took more than 230 others hostage, according to Israeli authorities.

Israel responded by imposing a siege and launching devastating airstrikes across Gaza, which Hamas governs. Israel says its goal is to destroy the militant group and return the hostages, but it is the Palestinian people living there who are bearing the brunt of the attacks.

The airstrikes have killed at least 11,025 Palestinians, including 4,506 children, and wounded more than 27,000 others so far, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah, which draws its figures from sources in Hamas-run Gaza.

Nasser says three of his relatives – all young children, including one who was only 8 months old – were killed when Israeli airstrikes caused their home to collapse, but he has no time to grieve.

As CEO of the nonprofit medical group [FAJR Scientific](https://fajrscientificus.org/), he is obligated to find a way to deliver aid and other resources to hospitals in need.

FAJR Scientific’s goal is to raise enough money to fill five 40-foot containers with medical supplies, surgical tools and sterile instruments, and ship them to Gaza, Nasser says.

“Doctors in Gaza don’t get to go home. It’s traumatic for them,” Nasser said. “They are exhausted. Their bodies are physically at the hospital, but their minds are with their families trying to check on them.”

In some cases, Nasser says, medical workers have discovered their own loved ones among the injured or dead, compounding the fears and anxieties they already experience.

It’s not the first time FAJR Scientific has supported Gaza’s medical community. The group has led several surgical missions to Gaza and trained nearly 100 Palestinian medical workers on the ground, Nasser says. In August, they provided more than $4 million in medical supplies to hospitals across the territory.

The [Palestinian American Medical Association](https://palestinian-ama.org/) (PAMA), another US-based nonprofit, is also leading efforts to assist health care workers in Gaza.

The group, which has more than 6,000 members and supporters and leads medical missions to the region, has raised over $2 million so far, PAMA president Dr. Mustafa Musleh told CNN.

They will use the money to purchase critical medicine and supplies, including anesthetics, antibiotics and other medications to fill containers that will be sent to Gaza. The group also has more than 1,000 health-care professionals on standby to enter the enclave as soon as Israel and Egypt allow entry to humanitarian workers, Musleh says.

“We’re desperate to send help,” the Palestinian American doctor from Dayton, Ohio, said. “It’s a catastrophic situation. … There’s 10 times more patients than what the hospitals can take care of and they’re all coming with serious life-threatening injuries that need immediate attention, and a lot of people die because of that.”

**‘Waiting for a miracle’**

Ahmad Muhanna, director of Al Awda Hospital in Jabalya, says the real nightmare is treating maimed children, whose faces he sees even when he closes his eyes.

“I’m being torn apart inside witnessing our children being martyred and receiving the carnage of their body parts, when they have no fault in this conflict,” Muhanna told CNN on October 29 from his hospital in northern Gaza.

Doctors are performing surgeries, including amputations, on children without clean water, let alone anesthesia or antibiotics, he says. Many are being treated on the floor due to a lack of empty hospital beds.

Israeli [airstrikes at or near medical facilities](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/11/10/northern-gaza-hospital-strikes-karadsheh-dnt-intl-amanpour-vpx.cnn) have further complicated the matter, Muhanna, 49, adds. Medical workers are in constant danger.

As of November 10, 198 health care workers have been killed and 130 others wounded in Gaza, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah. It also reports 21 hospitals and 51 primary health care centers are out of service.

Israel says it’s only targeting Hamas, whom it [accuses of using hospitals to hide and launch attacks](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/28/exp-hamas-al-shifa-hospital-vo-sot-102812aseg2-cnni-world.cnn). The Palestinian Ministry of Health and Hamas deny such claims.

Israel says civilian deaths and the destruction of vital facilities, including hospitals, are collateral damage it tries to mitigate, and that Palestinians should flee to safer areas. But doctors in Gaza say it’s impossible to evacuate patients without causing more death, and that [nowhere is truly safe](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/16/middleeast/israel-palestinian-evacuation-orders-invs/index.html).

“The Israeli air force is terrorizing us day and night above our tiny spot in the world,” said Muhanna, who believes high casualties prove Israel is not trying to mitigate civilian deaths. “They don’t have boundaries, no red lines they cannot cross. They have crossed every line by targeting women, elders, children, men, the disabled and every possible living thing.”

The chaos unfolding at Shifa, Al Awda and other hospitals across Gaza has left doctors exasperated. But with no ceasefire on the horizon and the borders tightly controlled, preventing vital supplies from reaching hospitals, more people will continue to die.

“We feel helpless towards our patients,” said Ghneim, the emergency room doctor at Shifa. “We want to provide patients with appropriate health care, but in many cases there’s nothing we can do.”

Meanwhile, Nasser and Musleh scramble to fundraise, buy supplies and coordinate shipping to the Rafah border crossing, where truckers anxiously await permission to enter Gaza and unload their life-saving cargo.

“The whole world turned their back on the people of Gaza,” Nasser said. “And right now we’re only waiting for a miracle.”

The Israeli military on Wednesday said that a February strike on Khan Younis in southern Gaza may have led Hamas militants to execute six hostages.

The bodies of those six male hostages [were recovered](https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/20/middleeast/israeli-hostages-gaza-intl-hnk/index.html) in late August. Two days later, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) [said that](https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/22/middleeast/israel-gaza-hostage-bodies-shot-questions-intl-latam/index.html) all of them had been shot, but it could not definitively say whether it was the cause of death. The slain hostages were Yoram Metzger,  Alexander Dancyg,  Avraham Munder, Chaim Peri, Nadav Popplewell, and Yagev Buchshtab.

“It is highly probable that their deaths were related to the strike near the location where they were held,” the military [said in a Wednesday statement](https://idfanc.activetrail.biz/ANC0412243784343) on the investigation.

Speaking at a press briefing about an investigation into the hostages’ deaths, an IDF official said the Israeli military struck “a terror target” on February 14 in Khan Younis, but did not know that hostages were being held nearby. “The investigation did not find anything wrong with this attack, in the planning process or the execution,” the official said.

After a forensic examination and other investigations, the military now believes that “the most plausible scenario” is that the hostages and their guards survived the initial effects of that strike but that the strike may have led militants to shoot the six hostages. The guards themselves subsequently died, the military official said, from “a secondary effect” of the strike, such a lack of oxygen in the tunnel where they were living.

IDF spokesperson Daniel Hagari later raised the possibility of the aftermath of the strike killing the hostages. He said that while the most likely way the hostages died was at the hands of militants following the February attack, with the militants then dying from “secondary effects of the strike,” there were also other possible explanations.

“Another possibility is that the hostages were killed by secondary effects along with the terrorists and subsequently shot by other terrorists who arrived later,” he said, adding, “a less probable possibility is that the hostages were killed before the strike.”

Hagari said that due to the amount of time that passed from when the hostages were killed to when the forensic exams took place, “it is not possible to definitively determine whether the hostages were killed by gunfire or as a result of exposure to the aftermath of the strike.”

“Operational lessons from this incident have been incorporated to minimize risks to hostages in the future,” he said.

**Another hostage recovered**

As the six hostages’ families were presented with the findings of the investigation surrounding their deaths, the military announced on Wednesday that it recovered the body of yet another hostage.

Israel recovered 38-year-old dual German-Israeli citizen Itay Svirsky’s body from Gaza, after he was killed by his captors, the Israeli military and security agency Shin Bet announced.

“In a special operation, the body of the abductee Itay Svirsky was recovered, who was kidnapped on October 7, 2023, from Kibbutz Be’eri and murdered in captivity by Hamas terrorists in January 2024,” the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) said, adding that the operation was carried out by Israel’s military and security agency.

“Our heart is torn by the heavy loss of the Svirsky family, who also lost Itay’s parents, Orit and the late Rafi, who were murdered in the murderous attack by Hamas,” it added.

The Hostages and Missing Families Forum said Svirsky was laid to rest in Israel, and on behalf of his family, requested the public not to share images of him from the Hamas video that was distributed in January.

In January, Hamas released a video showing clips of [three hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/10/middleeast/hamas-israel-hostages-ceasefire-talks-intl/index.html) – Noa Argamani, Svirsky and Yossi Sharabi – speaking to the camera, ending with a caption saying, “Tomorrow, we will inform you of their fate.” The next day, another video appeared to show the dead bodies of Svirsky and Sharabi. In the video, Argamani said both men had been killed by Israeli bombing.

This brings the number of hostages currently held – dead and alive – to 100, of which 96 were taken on October 7.

Qatar is suspending its role as a [mediator in talks](https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/08/politics/qatar-egypt-israel-hamas-talks/index.html) between Israel and Hamas after concluding that the two sides are no longer negotiating in good faith, its foreign ministry said Saturday.

Qatar, which has [hosted Hamas’ political office](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/qatar-mediation-israel-hamas-intl/index.html) in Doha since 2012, has alongside Egypt served as an intermediary for the two sides, which do not officially maintain direct contact.

A diplomatic source briefed on the matter told CNN that the Qatari government made the decision after concluding that both sides are now refusing “to engage constructively.”

“The State of Qatar notified the parties 10 days ago during the last attempts to reach an agreement, that it would stall its efforts to mediate between Hamas and Israel if an agreement was not reached in that round,” Majed Al-Ansari, the spokesperson for the Qatari Foreign Ministry, [said](https://x.com/MofaQatar_EN/status/1855322121989148692/photo/1) in a statement Saturday.

Except for a brief flurry of activity last month, there have been no real negotiations since six Israeli hostages [were executed by Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/31/middleeast/israeli-american-hostage-hersh-goldberg-polin-death-intl-hnk/index.html) and discovered in a Gaza tunnel at the end of August. During a temporary ceasefire mediated by Qatar and Egypt last November, Hamas released 105 hostages and Israel released 240 Palestinian prisoners.

“The Qataris have concluded that there is insufficient willingness from either side, with the mediation efforts becoming more about politics and PR rather than a serious attempt to secure peace, save the hostages and Palestinian civilians,” the diplomatic source told CNN. “As a consequence, the Hamas political office no longer serves its purpose.”

A separate diplomatic source told CNN that Hamas’ political office in Doha “⁠won’t be operational so (Hamas) may leave. The office could open again if talks restart.”

Hamas has insisted that any agreement with Israel must lead to a permanent end to the war in Gaza. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has refused that demand. In July he [effectively spiked](https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/04/middleeast/netanyahu-derailed-hostage-deal-in-july-intl/index.html) a draft hostage and ceasefire deal by introducing a raft of new, 11th-hour demands.

There are 101 hostages still held in Gaza. Israel’s military campaign, launched in response to Hamas’ October 7 attack, has killed more than 43,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health; the UN reported that [70% of the fatalities in the first six months of the conflict](https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/09/middleeast/un-warnings-gaza-humanitarian-conditions-intl/index.html) were women and children.

The Israeli minister of economy, Nir Barkat, appeared to offer the first official Israeli reaction to the move, saying on X that “Qatar was never a mediator, but Hamas’ defender, the one to fund and protect the terrorist organization.” Netanyahu [for years backed](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/11/middleeast/qatar-hamas-funds-israel-backing-intl/index.html) payments to Hamas through Qatar, in order to divide Palestinian politics and – detractors allege – prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.

It is not the first time the Qatari government has expressed frustration – particularly with [insinuations that it was too close to Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/18/middleeast/qatar-reconsidering-mediation-role-gaza-hostage-talks-anlysis-mime-intl/index.html). In April, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said that Qatar’s efforts were being misused for “narrow political interests” by some involved in the conflict, “which required the state of Qatar to conduct a comprehensive evaluation” of its role.

The Qatari government has now told the Biden administration that it is willing to restart its mediation efforts “when both sides reach an impasse and demonstrate a sincere willingness to return to the negotiating table with the objective of putting an end to the war and the suffering of civilians.”

A senior American official told CNN that while Qatar had played “an invaluable role in helping to mediate a hostage deal” last year, “following Hamas’ repeated refusal to release even a small number of hostages, including most recently during meetings in Cairo, their continued presence in Doha is no longer viable or acceptable.”

“Omer loved sports, playing soccer, basketball, and volleyball, and served as the captain of his school’s sports teams,” the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said in a statement. “Family and friends described him as a warm, optimistic, and caring individual who ‘lights up the room the moment he enters.’”

Israel’s Foreign Minister Israel Katz said in a statement that Neutra “fell in a heroic battle near Nir Oz on October 7.” Nir Oz, a small kibbutz near Gaza in southern Israel, was one of the communities worst impacted by the terror attacks of October 7, with one in four residents murdered or kidnapped.

Neutra’s parents Ronen and Orna Neutra spoke to CNN last week, describing the pain of having to celebrate their second Thanksgiving without their son at the table.

Believing Omer to be alive, they said they were hoping the [ceasefire](https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/26/middleeast/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-ceasefire-explainer-intl-latam/index.html) between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon could serve as a “time to refocus” on securing his release.

“We have seen that attention both in Israel and around the world was taken from the war in Gaza to the war in Lebanon in the last four or five months, and that was a concern to us,” Ronen Neutra said. “But at the same time, we are disappointed that it was not combined with a hostage deal, which is really the most urgent element right now. We consider it a missed opportunity.”

US President Joe Biden said in a statement on Monday that he and first lady Jill Biden were “devastated and outraged” following the announcement of Neutra’s death.

“Less than a month ago, Omer’s mother and father joined me at the White House to share the pain they’ve endured as they prayed for the safe return of their son – pain no parent should ever know,” Biden wrote in the statement.

“During this dark hour – as our nation joins Omer’s parents, brother, and family in grieving this tragic loss – we pray to find strength and resilience. And to all the families of those still held hostage: We see you. We are with you. And I will not stop working to bring your loved ones back home where they belong,” the president added.

**‘Devastating’ news**

The announcement of Neutra’s death sparked an outpouring of grief from Israeli officials. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called him “a person of great values, rich in talents, and a Zionist in every fiber of his being.”

Israel’s President Isaac Herzog, who has met Neutra’s family on several occasions, described the news of his death as “devastating.”

“Omer was born and raised in the United States and chose to (come) to Israel, and enlist in the IDF to stand in the defense of our people,” Herzog said.

The news of Neutra’s death came just days after Hamas released a video of Edan Alexander, one of the three Israeli-American hostages still believed to be alive in Gaza.

The propaganda video was released on Saturday. It shows Alexander, 20, who appears to be under duress, stating he has been held captive for more than 420 days and begging Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President-elect Donald Trump for his release. Monday marked 423 days since the war between Israel and Hamas erupted.

Speaking in front of thousands at a rally on Saturday night at “Hostage Square” in Tel Aviv, Alexander’s mother Yael Alexander said she was “shaken by the video.”

She told the crowd she had been contacted by the Israeli leader following the release of the video.

“My Edan, my love, we miss you so much. I want to tell you that following your request, about an hour ago, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called me. He strengthened me and assured me that now, after the deal in Lebanon, the conditions are ripe to release you and bring you home,” she said.

According to Israeli authorities, Hamas is holding 101 hostages in Gaza – 97 taken on October 7, 2023 and four others who were kidnapped before that. At least 37 of the hostages have now been confirmed dead by Israel. The hostages include 13 women and two children under the age of five, according to the authorities.

A [ceasefire deal](https://cnn.com/2024/03/05/middleeast/gaza-hamas-ceasefire-israel-intl/index.html) in Gaza that would see [Israeli hostages](https://cnn.com/2024/03/04/europe/un-team-sexual-abuse-oct-7-hostages-intl/index.html) freed and the first break in the [fighting](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-03-06-24/index.html) in more than three months is unlikely to happen by the start of Ramadan which the Biden administration had been aiming for, according to sources familiar with the negotiations.

Negotiators had hoped to have a draft agreement this week after days of meetings in [Cairo](https://cnn.com/2024/03/03/middleeast/isreal-delegation-cairo-gaza-hostages-intl/index.html), “but it won’t happen,” said one diplomat familiar with the discussions who described the last few days of talks as “very hectic.”

Two American officials agreed that the prospects are not promising of Israel and Hamas agreeing to the temporary truce by the start of the [Muslim holy month](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-03-06-24/h_2390d9cd3b6f9747f29e33d365b98a92) early next week.

“Hope is fading,” one US official said.

A failure to achieve a deal in the next few days would come after weeks of US President Joe Biden and administration officials saying an agreement needs to be in place by Ramadan to avoid escalation of the five-month war. He warned Tuesday that without a ceasefire by then the region could become “very, very dangerous.”

Israel has also [warned](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/middleeast/israel-rafah-ramadan-gantz-intl/index.html) that if the Israeli hostages being held in Gaza aren’t home by Ramadan they will launch a military offensive into Rafah in southern Gaza where around 1.5 million Palestinians are trying to seek safety from the fighting.

Representatives from Hamas, Egypt, Qatar and the United States had gathered this week in the Egyptian capital for more talks while Israel refused to send a delegation because Hamas has not yet provided a list of hostages who are alive and dead, a recent demand by Israel.

Ad Feedback

The Biden administration insists Israel has already accepted the broad terms of a six-week pause while Hamas is holding out.

A [Hamas delegation left Cairo](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-03-07-24/h_b7be5fde7b477f8926076409900aa965) on Thursday after days of talks with no obvious breakthrough in negotiations aimed at reaching a ceasefire in exchange for hostage releases. Egypt state-run Al Qahera news, citing a senior source, said that the delegation has left to consult on the proposals, and that negotiations will resume next week.

“It’s in the hands of Hamas right now,” Biden told reporters on Tuesday as he boarded Air Force One. He had raised hopes last week saying that a ceasefire could be in place by this past Monday, a prediction he later admitted was unlikely.

One thing the administration and Hamas agree on is the desire for a temporary, six-week truce to turn into a permanent ceasefire without a resumption in the fighting. Biden officials have said they believe the pause could evolve into a more enduring peace, while Israel has maintained they plan to continue efforts to dismantle Hamas, particularly in Rafah.

Hope is not lost that a first phase could be launched soon, the diplomat cautioned, saying they believe an agreement could be possible in the first week or two of Ramadan.

But the deadly incident last week in which [more than100 Palestinians were killed](https://cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-food-truck-deaths-israel-wwk-intl/index.html) in Gaza City when an aid convoy was mobbed and Israeli forces opened fire “took us back 10 steps,” the diplomat said. Hamas then presented a response to a negotiated framework to mediators that “no one is happy about.”

A deal, if successful, is expected to include multiple phases. In the first stage, when the fighting would stop for at least six weeks, around 40 Israeli elderly, female, sick and wounded hostages are expected to be released. In parallel, Israel would also free Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisoners, a number that could be in the hundreds.

Hamas had backed off some of its more stringent demands, sources had told CNN, but following last week’s “Flour Massacre,” as it has [become](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/un-experts-condemn-flour-massacre-urge-israel-end-campaign-starvation-gaza) known, the group pushed for more assurances. Namely that in the first phase the Israeli military would pull back from Gazan cities and in a second withdraw from the enclave altogether, according to the diplomat who said the IDF is refusing to agree to those points.

Not only do Palestinians from northern Gaza need to be able to return to what is left of their homes, Hamas has argued in the talks, but do so without going through IDF checkpoints. There are demands by Hamas, the diplomat said, that specific machinery be provided to move rubble as well as field hospitals and clinics.

Hamas said its delegation left Cairo Thursday “to consult with the movement’s leadership, as negotiations and efforts continue to stop the aggression, return the displaced, and bring relief aid to our Palestinian people,” the group said in a statement.

On Wednesday Hamas argued that it had “shown flexibility” but Israel continued to “evade the obligations of the agreement” being discussed.

“We have affirmed our conditions for a ceasefire: complete [IDF] withdrawal from the sector, the return of displaced persons to the areas they left, especially in the north, and the provision of sufficient aid, relief, and reconstruction,” Hamas senior leader Osama Hamdan told a news conference in Beirut on Tuesday.

Ramadan, a month of fasting and piety for Muslims, is a “period in which you have calm and you’re able to do the essential humanitarian work,” a senior administration official told reporters in a weekend briefing.

About a quarter of Gaza’s population is [on the brink of famine](https://cnn.com/2024/03/04/middleeast/gaza-children-dying-malnutrition-israel-ceasefire-talks-intl-hnk/index.html), according to the United Nations. The Biden administration has escalated its criticism of Israel’s refusal to open more border crossings to allow aid into Gaza, particularly to address needs in the north.

“There are no excuses,” Biden [posted](https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1764683471543210432) on X.

Even without a ceasefire, said US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday, it is urgent “to dramatically increase the humanitarian assistance that’s getting to people inside of Gaza. The situation with children, women and men who are caught in this crossfire of Hamas’ making inside of Gaza is unacceptable and not sustainable.”

Blinken made the comments before a meeting with Qatar’s Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, a central player in the ceasefire mediation. In their meeting, Blinken acknowledged that the pause and hostage deal is unlikely before the start of Ramadan, said a person familiar with the meeting.

The same person said the CIA Director Bill Burns, who has been leading the administration’s efforts in the negotiations, had a long meeting with Thani during the latter’s visit to Washington.

Bill Burns has traveled back to the Middle East, according to a US official and another source familiar with the trip.

The sources said Burns was in Egypt on Wednesday before traveling to Qatar on Thursday. Burns is not expected to stop in Israel on this trip, the US official said, nor is there expected to be a “quad” format meeting with the Egyptian and Israeli intelligence chiefs and the Qatari Prime Minister, as there was in Paris two weeks ago.

“We continue to believe that the obstacles are not insurmountable and that a deal can be reached,” State Department spokesman Matt Miller said Wednesday when asked about the lack of a breakthrough. “The deal is in the interest of Israel. It’s in the interest of the Palestinian people. And it’s in the interest of the broader region, so we’re going to continue to push for one.”

Saadi Baraka wakes at dawn and works until dusk, digging on his knees in the dirt as he tries to [bury Gaza’s dead](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/20/middleeast/israel-gaza-cemeteries-desecrated-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html) with dignity in a cemetery he says has run out of room.

The graveyard at [Deir al-Balah](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2024/03/02/exp-paula-hancocks-military-suspension-live-030205aseg1-cnni-world.cnn) in central Gaza, dotted with the green and gray of shrubs and tombs, has been expanded several times in recent months to accommodate the interminable flow of bodies.

Baraka says he has buried 16,880 people since Israel launched its assault on Gaza in response to Hamas’ October 7 terror attack – more than half of the [30,631 reported dead](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-30000-israel-war-hnk-intl/index.html) by the enclave’s ministry of health. Israel estimates about 10,000 of those killed are Hamas fighters. CNN cannot independently verify the casualty tolls in Gaza or the Israeli estimates of Hamas fighters killed.

“I come to the cemetery at 6 a.m. and stay until 6 p.m. to prepare mass graves for 30, 40 people,” Baraka told CNN Monday. “I have made 167 mass graves. I only hope they send us some tiles and cement so we can bury the people with dignity.”

Baraka, 64, was a gravedigger long before October 7. But he says the horrors he has seen since then – dismembered children, whole families buried together, graves filled “with tens of people in each” – have been hard to comprehend.

“I try to go to sleep, and I swear I can’t even if I take 2 kilos of sleeping pills,” he said.

Baraka estimates around 85% of those he has buried have been women and children. “They killed all the women. They were all killed because they are the ones that stayed at home,” he said.

Of the thousands of bodies that have poured into his cemetery, he claimed he has buried no more than three Hamas fighters. He said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “is lying when he says he is killing Hamas.”

CNN footage shows workers building new graves with concrete blocks above ground instead of digging fresh ones in the crowded earth. Baraka pours dirt through a sieve, separating the rocks from the silt, then adds water and churns the cement with a shovel, before smoothing it with a spade over the top of a grave, covered with a flap of corrugated iron.

Most tombstones are a single concrete block – the same used to build the walls of the grave. Epitaphs are scratched into the concrete with a nail, or simply etched into the wet cement with the tip of a spade.

As Baraka and his men work, they are surrounded by the buzz of Israeli drones and the stench of death.

“Of course it smells, those are mass graves,” he says. He remembers many of the dead by name. “This is the Laghi family, this is the Abu Hasanein family, those are Abu Hattab,

While many of the dead have been killed by Israeli airstrikes, which have pummeled Gaza for nearly five months, many are now [dying of hunger](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/04/middleeast/gaza-children-dying-malnutrition-israel-ceasefire-talks-intl-hnk/index.html), according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

A WHO team said Monday it found “severe levels of malnutrition, children dying of starvation, serious shortages of fuel, food and medical supplies, hospital buildings destroyed,” during a recent visit to the north of Gaza.

The warning came just days after [scores of Palestinians were killed](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-food-truck-deaths-israel-wwk-intl/index.html) trying to access food in Gaza City on Thursday. At least 118 were killed and 760 injured in an incident where Israel Defense Forces (IDF) troops used live fire as hungry and desperate Palestinian civilians gathered around food aid trucks, according to the Palestinian ministry of health.

After the incident, the US for the first time [air-dropped humanitarian aid into Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/02/politics/us-airdrops-aid-gaza/index.html). More than 38,000 meals were dropped Saturday along the Gaza coastline in a combined operation by the US Air Force and the Royal Jordanian Air Force. A further 36,800 were dropped Tuesday, according to CENTCOM.

But Baraka dismissed the operations as a political stunt. “We don’t want them to drop fast food from airplanes. They are showing off.”

While CNN filmed, a woman entered the cemetery with several men carrying the bagged body of her lifeless daughter. She begs Baraka to see her daughter before he buries her. Baraka agrees, then asks the men to let the woman look upon her daughter for the last time while he prepares her grave. Later, dozens stand and pray while her body is lowered into the ground.

Baraka said he worked in Israel for 28 years and wants to live to see an end to generations of violence.

“I only want peace and I see no other solution. We should live as one and that’s it. It’s enough with all those wars,” he said.

He said he supports “two states for two people living together with love,” but warned that Israel’s attempt to “destroy” Hamas will not bring this about.

“You are wasting your time, Netanyahu,” Baraka says in Arabic, before switching to Hebrew. “If you want to finish Hamas – I tell you in Hebrew so you can hear me – you are wasting your time.”

Hamas media outlet Al Aqsa TV said Saleh Al-Arouri,deputy head of the political bureau of Hamas, was “martyred in a treacherous Zionist airstrike in Beirut.”

Arouri was considered one of the founding members of the group’s military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and was based in Beirut. Two other leaders from Hamas’ military wing, Samir Findi Abu Amer and Azzam Al-Aqraa Abu Ammar, were also among those killed in the strike, according to Hamas officials.

At least four people were killed in the attack that targeted an office belonging to Hamas in the southern Beirut suburb of Dahieh, Lebanese news agency NNA reported. The area is also a stronghold of Iran-backed Hezbollah.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) declined to comment when asked about the announcementand its spokesperson Daniel Hagari skirted a question from a reporter on Tuesday about the matter saying “we are focused on fighting against Hamas.”

Ad Feedback

But in a seemingly veiled reference to the killing, Israel’s far right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich wrote on his official social media platforms that all of Israel’s enemies will “perish.”

Meanwhile, a former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Danny Danon, praised the Israeli security and intelligence agencies for what he said was the “assassination” of Arouri on Tuesday. “Anyone who was involved in the 7/10 massacre should know that we will reach out to them and close an account with them,” Danon said on X.

If true, Arouri would be the most senior Hamas official killed by Israeli forces since the start of the war sparked by the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

In addition to dealing a blow to Hamas’ leadership, the apparent attack also risks further broadening the arena of the Israel-Hamas conflict. It would mark the biggest Israeli strike on the Lebanese capital since the 2006 war between the two countries.

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati condemned the attack and said the “explosion is a new Israeli crime” aimed at drawing Lebanon into a new phase of confrontation, referring to the months-long tit-for-tat conflict between Hezbollah and Israeli forces in the Lebanon-Israel border region

“We call on the concerned countries to put pressure on Israel to stop its targeting. We also warn against the Israeli political level resorting to exporting its failures in Gaza to the southern [Lebanese] border,” Mikati wrote on X.

“It has become clear to everyone near and far that the decision to go to war is in the hands of Israel, and what is required is to deter it and stop its aggression,” he added.

Israel vowed to annihilate Hamas after its militants killed hundreds of people in Israel on October 7. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in November told a press conference that he had instructed the Mossad spy agency to act against “the heads of Hamas wherever they are.”

Israeli government spokesperson Mark Regev noted in an interview with MSNBC that Israel had “not taken responsibility” for the attack in Beirut. Regev, who is a senior adviser to Netanyahu, said “whoever did it must be clear that this was not an attack on the Lebanese state. It was not an attack even on Hezbollah,” Regev said.

Regev said that although individuals who kill Israelis “can expect the Israeli state and the Israeli armed forces to ultimately reach them,” this rather is a “general statement” of Israel’s policy.

Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas’ political leader, called Arouri’s killing a “cowardly assassination” and blamed Israel for the deadly strike, as did the Iran-backed [Houthi rebels](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/19/middleeast/red-sea-crisis-explainer-houthi-yemen-israel-intl/index.html) in Yemen, who have launched [more than 100 attacks](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/19/politics/houthi-red-sea-attacks/index.html) against about a dozen commercial and merchant ships transiting the Red Sea over the past few weeks.

**Fears of escalation**

For nearly three months, tit-for-tat fighting between Israel’s military and Hezbollah has largely stayed within a roughly four-kilometer range of the border region, with Hezbollah striking Israel while Israel struck Lebanon.

The fighting has raised fears among the United States and other Western countries that a full-scale war could break out between Israel and the Middle East’s most powerful paramilitary, Hezbollah.

Those fears have so far failed to materialize, but the blast in Beirut on Tuesday afternoon is likely to fuel concerns about the potential for escalation.

During a televized address last summer, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah warned against Israeli assassinations in Lebanon, saying that they would inspire a “strong response” from the militant group.

Nasrallah also said in the August 2023 speech that the group would try to prevent Lebanon from becoming an “arena for assassinations,” invoking the country’s tumultuous past.

On Tuesday, Iran – which backs Hezbollah – condemned Arouri’s assassination and blamed the attack on Israel.

Arouri’s death comes as Israel’s military begins to [draw down the number of soldiers](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/01/middleeast/israel-to-withdraw-some-troops-from-gaza-intl/index.html) on the ground in Gaza as it looks to move to a new phase of its war on Hamas amid a spiraling civilian death toll in the besieged enclave.

**Who is Saleh Al-Arouri?**

The prominent Hamas political and military leader was born in 1966 in the village of Aroura in the Ramallah district of the West Bank. He went on to play a role in founding the Al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas in the West Bank, and is considered to be the mastermind behind arming the group.

He was a member of Hamas since 1987 and considered its leader in the West Bank prior to his death, according to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). He has been a member of Hamas Politburo since 2010 and was elected its deputy head in 2017, ECFR added.

Israel considers him one of the key founders of the Al-Qassam Brigades in the occupied West Bank and accused him of being behind the kidnapping of three settlers in Hebron, which led to the demolition of his house. He began establishing and organizing a military apparatus for the movement in the West Bank in 1991-1992, which contributed to the actual launch of the Al-Qassam Brigades in the West Bank in 1992.

He helped negotiate the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, in 2011, in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

He had been repeatedly detained by Israel, including for long periods between 1985-1992, and 1992-2007, according to ECHR.In 2010, he was deported by Israel to Syria, living there for three years before moving to Turkey and traveling to several countries, including Qatar and Malaysia. He finally settled in the southern suburbs of Lebanon.

The Israeli army demolished Arouri’s house in Aroura in October. The IDF said at the time that forces “operated in the town” to “demolish the residence of Saleh Al-Arouri, deputy head of the Hamas terrorist organization’s political bureau and in charge of Hamas’ activities in Judea and Samaria.”

In 2015, the US Department of the Treasury designated Arouri as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist and offered a reward of up to $5 million for information on him. CNN has reached out to the US State Department to see if the reward will be paid and to whom.

He was married with two daughters and lived in Lebanon at the time of his death.The Biden administration has told Israel that the strikes are unacceptable, officials said. One senior US official said that the US believes at least some of those strikes have been accidental, intended instead for the powerful Shiite Lebanese militant group Hezbollah which also operates along the Lebanon-Israel border and has been hitting Israeli military positions. But the intention of other strikes has been less clear, the official said, and more junior Israeli troops may not be exercising enough restraint.

But the scope of the incidents, which has not been previously reported, has frustrated US officials because the US believes the LAF will need to be part of any eventual diplomatic solution between Israel and Lebanon to quiet the current violence. The US is also deeply concerned that the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza could expand to the north, and US officials have been working with Israel and Lebanon to try to contain the war.

“The United States has been clear we do not want to see this conflict spread to Lebanon and we continue to urge the Israelis do all they can to be targeted and avoid civilians, civilian infrastructure, civilian farmland, the UN, and the Lebanese Armed Forces,” a spokesperson for the White House’s National Security Council told CNN. “The United States is proud of its partnership with the LAF, an essential institution, not only to the stability and security of Lebanon, but of the entire region.”

A spokesperson for the Israel Defense Forces told CNN on Friday that any harm caused “to other forces is unintentional.”

“In response to Hezbollah’s aggression, the IDF strikes the terrorist organization’s military infrastructure and works to eliminate any threat to the State of Israel,” IDF spokeperson Nir Dinar said.

“Any harm to civilians and other forces is unintentional. Such incidents are reviewed in order to improve operational precautions and to ensure accountability when necessary,” Dinar added.

The Lebanese military is not as strong as Hezbollah, which gets funding, training and weapons from Iran and is one of the most formidable paramilitary forces in the Middle East. But the US backing of the LAF gives Washington a partner in an active region that it can work with on a range of priorities, including counterterrorism. The senior US official noted that the LAF is popular among the Lebanese public and, while not seen as a perfect counterweight to Hezbollah, is a neutral alternative that the US believes will be an important player in any future peace settlement.

US officials believe Israel’s attacks on the Lebanese military have resulted in at least eight injuries and one death since October 7.

According to a US list of the strikes seen by CNN, one Lebanese soldier was [killed](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-05-23/h_316aaaaabc11092d03923e7987f47fa8) and three were wounded on December 5 after four tank shells hit a position on the Blue Line, the UN’s demarcation of the border between Israel and Lebanon.

The Israeli military apologized and said the Lebanese Armed Forces were not the target of the strike. The LAF has not struck back militarily, US officials said.

Among the other incidents in southern Lebanon were Israeli strikes on two LAF positions on October 21 that destroyed an observation post. Six days later, a LAF patrol that included a brigade commander came under direct fire, according to US officials. On December 8, one Lebanese soldier suffered from the effects of white phosphorous.

That followed an October incident in which Israel reportedly used US-supplied white phosphorous munitions and injured at least nine civilians, [according](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/12/11/israel-us-white-phosphorus-lebanon/) to The Washington Post. The White House said it would be seeking answers from Israel about its use of white phosphorous.

“The IDF’s continued pattern of strikes against LAF positions are concerning and irresponsible. The LAF is a critical and independent force that successive US administrations have supported in recognition of its important role in stability in Lebanon,” said a senior congressional aide. “Many members of Congress share the administration’s strong concerns with such actions.”

As the pace of the strikes escalated, administration officials made clear to Israeli leadership that they need to be more careful, US officials told CNN. Meanwhile, the US has been working with Lebanon to try to quell the violence between Israel and Hezbollah and quiet the northern border. Israel wants Hezbollah to retreat north of the Litani River, which is about 18 miles away from the border, Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant has said.

On October 13, a Reuters journalist was killed and six other journalists were wounded in two tank artillery strikes in southern Lebanon while covering the fighting. The journalists, clearly wearing blue flak jackets marked ‘Press’, [were on an exposed hilltop](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/amnesty-israeli-attack-that-killed-reuters-journalist-wounded-others-must-be-2023-12-07/) as Israeli helicopters and drones buzzed above.

Investigations by two human rights groups as well as Reuters and Agence France-Presse found that the targeting was likely deliberate. Human Rights Watch [called](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/07/israel-strikes-journalists-lebanon-apparently-deliberate) the attack a potential war crime.

“This is not the first time that Israeli forces have apparently deliberately attacked journalists, with deadly and devastating results,” said Ramzi Kaiss, a Lebanon researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Those responsible need to be held to account, and it needs to be made clear that journalists and other civilians are not lawful targets.”

Britain’s Prince William has shared his concern over Israel’s five [months-long](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/15/middleeast/hamas-israel-ceasefire-hostage-talks-what-we-know-intl/index.html) military offensive [in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/middleeast/gaza-nasser-hospital-doctors-strip-idf-intl/index.html), saying he wants to “see an end to the fighting as soon as possible.”

“I remain deeply concerned about the terrible human cost of the conflict in the Middle East since the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October. Too many have been killed,” the prince said in a statement on Tuesday.

The heir to the throne said that he “like so many others” wants “an end to the fighting as soon as possible.”

The Israeli military launched its campaign in Gaza after the Hamas-led October 7 attacks that killed around 1,200 people in southern Israel. Israeli attacks on Gaza have since killed at least 29,092 Palestinians and injured another 69,028, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza.

Israel’s bombardment and besiegement of the strip have crushed the health care system, wiped out entire neighborhoods and exposed the population of nearly 2.3 million people to starvation, dehydration and deadly disease. At least 1.7 million people have been forcibly displaced, [according to](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-110) the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

A growing chorus of leaders have condemned the mounting death toll in Gaza. Earlier this week, the [US proposed](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/politics/us-un-security-council-temporary-ceasefire-draft-intl/index.html) a UN Security Council draft resolution calling for a temporary ceasefire.

The prince used his message to call for “increased humanitarian support” to Gaza, calling it “critical” for both aid to be allowed in and the hostages taken by Hamas to be released.

“Sometimes it is only when faced with the sheer scale of human suffering that the importance of permanent peace is brought home,” Prince William said.

“Even in the darkest hour, we must not succumb to the counsel of despair. I continue to cling to the hope that a brighter future can be found and I refuse to give up on that,” he said in his concluding remark.

**‘Deeply moved as a father’**

The prince said he was “deeply moved as a father” by a meeting he had with workers from an aid charity working in Gaza, according to Kensington Palace.

He paid a visit on Tuesday to the London headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who have been providing a humanitarian response to the war in Gaza.

At least 17,000 children in Gaza — about 1% of the total displaced population — are unaccompanied or separated from their parents, according to the [UN’s children’s agency](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-02-24/h_98998c850c6b35032d4f3a959d910f83). More than one million Palestinian children now require mental health and psychological support.

A royal source told CNN that Prince William has followed the region “closely” since he visited in 2018.

Although the prince did make a statement not long after the Hamas attacks on October 7, it was the “extent of the human suffering that is on display” that led him to make the statement on Tuesday, the royal source added.

The British royal family has long taken a stance of political neutrality and does not comment on political issues. The royal source told CNN that the British government was briefed by the foreign office in advance of the prince’s statement and engagements this week.

United Nations experts have called for an investigation into what they described as “credible allegations of egregious human rights violations” against Palestinian women and girls in [Gaza](https://cnn.com/2024/02/19/politics/us-un-security-council-temporary-ceasefire-draft-intl/index.html) and the West Bank by [Israeli forces](https://cnn.com/2024/02/19/middleeast/gaza-nasser-hospital-doctors-strip-idf-intl/index.html).

The allegations include extrajudicial killing, arbitrary detention, degrading treatment, rape and sexual violence, according to a statement by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released on Monday. It did not detail how they did their fact-finding, but they referred to photos of female detainees in degrading circumstances reportedly taken by Israeli troops and uploaded online.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) denied the accusations and said it adheres to international law. “Without precise details or proof of individual cases it is not possible for us to examine them in depth,” the IDF said in a statement to CNN.

Israel’s mission to the UN in Geneva also said it “forcefully rejects” what it called “despicable and unfounded claims” by the group of UN experts.

It said authorities had received no complaints of abuse but stressed “Israel remains ready to investigate any concrete claims of misconduct by its security forces when presented with credible allegations and evidence.”

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pointed to the Israeli statement when CNN asked for a response to the UN experts’ call for an independent investigation into the allegations.

The experts, who are part of the largest body for independent fact-finding and monitoring in the UN human rights system, expressed their concerns over the “arbitrary detention” of hundreds of Palestinian women and girls since the Hamas attacks of October 7.

“Many [Palestinian women and girls] have reportedly been subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment, denied menstruation pads, food and medicine, and severely beaten,” the statement said. “On at least one occasion, Palestinian women detained in Gaza were allegedly kept in a cage in the rain and cold, without food.”

The UN experts further said they were distressed by reports of “multiple forms of sexual assault” against Palestinian women and girls in detention, including “being stripped naked and searched by male Israeli army officers.”

“At least two female Palestinian detainees were reportedly raped while others were reportedly threatened with rape and sexual violence,” the statement added, calling on Israel to uphold the rights and dignity of Palestinian women and girls.

CNN cannot independently verify the allegations.

The UN and human rights organizations were criticized for being slow to denounce the [reports of rape and mutilation](https://cnn.com/2023/11/17/world/israel-investigates-sexual-violence-hamas/index.html) against Israelis – mostly girls and women but also men – by Hamas fighters on October 7.

The UN agency UN Women released a statement in December condemning the attacks saying it was “alarmed by the numerous accounts of gender-based atrocities and sexual violence during those attacks.”

CNN has previously [reported](https://cnn.com/2024/01/04/middleeast/sexual-assault-october-7-israel-witness-int/index.html) on testimony from a survivor of the [Nova music festival](https://cnn.com/interactive/2023/10/middleeast/hamas-music-festival-attack-investigation-cmd-intl/) in the desert of southern Israel describing sexual violence by Hamas fighters against Israeli women.

Responding on Monday to the UN experts’ call for an investigation, Israel again accused the UN of remaining “silent on the horrific sexual violence and gender-based violence perpetrated by Hamas on and since October 7.”

The meeting follows visits from Wang to Israel and the occupied West Bank – making him the first known envoy Beijing has sent to either location since Hamas’ deadly October 7 attacks and the ensuing Israeli bombardment of Gaza.

Wang and Haniyeh “exchanged views on the Gaza conflict and other issues” during their meeting Sunday, according to a [brief readou](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/sjxw_674887/202403/t20240319_11262449.shtml)t from China’s Foreign Ministry Tuesday.

Haniyeh stressed in the meeting “the need to quickly stop the aggression and massacres,” for the Israeli military to withdraw from Gaza, and “achieve the political goals and aspirations of establishing an independent Palestinian state,” according to a press release from the Hamas government media office. Chinese Ambassador to Qatar Cao Xiaolin was also present at the meeting, the statement said.

Haniyeh “praised the role played by China in the Security Council, the United Nations, and the International Court of Justice,” the Hamas statement said, referring to Beijing’s recent diplomacy related to the war.

The militant group also said they had met with Cao late last month in Qatar. China’s Foreign Ministry and its embassy in Qatar did not release any information about that meeting.

Wang’s visit comes as Beijing aims to step up its profile as a [peace broker](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/19/china/ukraine-gaza-war-china-peace-plan-intl-hnk/index.html) and has become increasingly vocal in its opposition to the Gaza war.

Wang, a former ambassador to Lebanon, has been in the region since at least March 10 when he met with counterparts in Egypt, before traveling to the West Bank, Israel and Qatar as part of a previously unannounced trip in which the war in Gaza has been high on the agenda.

Fighting began on October 7 when Hamas carried out a deadly attack on Israel, killing more than 1,200 people and taking some 250 hostages, according to Israel. Israeli forces have since launched months of ongoing bombardment and ground operations in the Hamas-ruled enclave of Gaza, where the death toll stands higher than 31,000, according to the Ministry of Health in the strip.

Beijing did not [name or condemn Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/23/china/china-middle-east-envoy-mediation-intl-hnk/index.html) in the wake of the October 7 attacks. Since then, it has condemned the war and been a vocal [proponent of an immediate ceasefire](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/china/china-arab-countries-beijing-israel-hamas-conflict-intl-hnk/index.html) and the implementation of a “two-state” solution.

During his visit to the West Bank, Wang met with the Palestinian Authority’s foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki, where the Chinese envoy said Beijing is “deeply concerned” about the conflict in Gaza.

He also pledged to work with the international community to “swiftly extinguish the flames of war” and achieve a “comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian question based on a two-state solution,” according to a readout from China’s Foreign Ministry.

In a subsequent visit to Israel Thursday, Wang met with Israeli foreign affairs officials, stating that the top priority is a “comprehensive ceasefire, cessation of the war, guarantee of humanitarian aid and protection of civilians,” a separate Chinese readout said.

China dispatched Zhai Jun, a special envoy for the Middle East, to the region in the weeks following the October 7 attack and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held meetings in Egypt at the start of the year, but neither were confirmed to have visited the Palestinian Territories or Israel.

Chinese officials have had other contact with Israeli and Palestinian officials since the start of the war, including when Beijing hosted a delegation from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, the Palestinian National Authority, and Indonesia in November.

**Solidarity with Global South**

Beijing has also used the war as a platform to showcase its solidarity with the Arab world and Global South, while positioning its views as in opposition to those of the United States.

[Speaking to reporters](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/china/china-two-sessions-foreign-minister-presser-intl-hnk/index.html) in Beijing earlier this month, Foreign Minister Wang said the failure to end the humanitarian disaster in Gaza was a “disgrace for civilization” and he urged the international community to “act promptly to promote an immediate ceasefire as its overriding priority.”

“China supports Palestine’s full membership in the UN, and urges certain UN Security Council member not to lay obstacles to that end,” Wang said in a veiled swipe at Washington, which has backed Israel’s right to retaliate following Hamas’ terror attack.

China has also called for convening an international peace conference and setting a specific timetable for implementing a two-state solution.

Though it is unclear how much sway China has in the region to play a strong role backing such an effort, an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel is consistent with Beijing’s longstanding foreign policy. It was one of the first countries to recognize Palestine as a sovereign state in the late 1980s and has long advocated for a two-state solution.

Beijing’s growing criticism of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians comes as it too has been accused of rights abuses against minorities, particularly in its western Xinjiang region.

The UN’s highest human rights office said “serious human rights violations” that could amount to “crimes against humanity” have been committed against Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, where rights groups and researchers have said more than a million people may have been placed in “re-education” camps. Beijing denies committing rights abuses in Xinjiang

Famine is imminent in northern Gaza where 70% of the population are already suffering with [catastrophic levels of hunger](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/07/world/gallery/gaza-hunger-malnutrition/index.html), a UN-backed report said Monday, as the EU’s top diplomat accused Israel of using “starvation as a weapon of war.”

All 2.2 million people in Gaza do not have enough food to eat, with half of the population on the brink of starvation and famine projected to arrive in the north “anytime between mid-March and May 2024,” according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).

Acute hunger and malnutrition have already “far exceeded” the threshold for famine in northern Gaza and the IPC warns of a “major acceleration of death and malnutrition.”

This is the “highest number of people facing catastrophic hunger ever recorded… anywhere, anytime,” by the IPC, said United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

At least 25 people, including children and babies, have died from starvation and dehydration in the north, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza. People have resorted to scavenging, [eating grass](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/middleeast/famine-looms-in-gaza-israel-war-intl/index.html) and animal feed, and drinking polluted water. [Starving mothers](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/middleeast/israel-gaza-starvation-siege-mothers-babies-intl/index.html) are unable to produce enough milk to feed their babies and parents beg for infant formula at overwhelmed health facilities, parents and doctors told CNN.

The crisis has been described as “entirely man-made” and “preventable” due to Israel’s [throttling of aid](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/01/middleeast/gaza-aid-israel-restrictions-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html) and widespread destruction of Gaza. The report said famine conditions will spread unless there is an “immediate cessation of hostilities” and full aid access granted to the strip.

“People in Gaza are starving to death right now. The speed at which this man-made hunger and malnutrition crisis has ripped through Gaza is terrifying,” said World Food Programme Executive Director Cindy McCain.

“There is a very small window left to prevent an outright famine and to do that we need immediate and full access to the north. If we wait until famine has been declared, it’s too late. Thousands more will be dead.”

The European Union’s top diplomat Josep Borrell accused Israel of using “starvation as a weapon of war,” saying the famine was “not a natural disaster” but caused by Israel “preventing humanitarian support entering into Gaza.”

Hundreds of trucks were waiting at the border and being prevented entry into Gaza by Israel, he said.

“The support is there waiting. Trucks are stopped, people are dying,” Borrell said. Aid delivery by sea and air was only necessary because the “natural” way of delivering aid by land was “artificially closed” by Israel, he added.

The World Food Programme estimates that at least 300 trucks are needed to enter Gaza every day and distribute food to meet only the basic hunger needs. The UN agency has only managed to take nine convoys into northern Gaza since the start of the year, it said in a statement.

A ceasefire remains the only way for agencies such as the WFP to “roll out a massive relief operation reaching all the communities in need,”

**Famine will spread, warning over Rafah offensive**

Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu told CNN in an interview on Sunday](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2024/03/17/sotu-netanyahu-full-interview.cnn) that his country’s policy is to let as much humanitarian aid into Gaza as is necessary. But that claim has been disputed [by aid agencies and even contradicts his own statements.](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/18/middleeast/netanyahu-aid-policy-claims-gaza-war-mime-intl/index.html)

“Our policy is to not have famine, but to be the entry of humanitarian support as needed, and as much as is needed,” Netanyahu told CNN.

[Aid workers and government officials say](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/01/middleeast/gaza-aid-israel-restrictions-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html) a pattern has emerged of Israeli obstruction, where Israel’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the agency that controls access to Gaza, has imposed arbitrary and contradictory criteria on relief entering the enclave.

About 210,000 people in the northern Gaza governates are already thought to be in Phase 5 of the IPC Food Insecurity Scale - known as the “Catastrophe Phase.”

One in three children below the age of 2 are “acutely malnourished,” the report said.

In the south, the governorates of Deir al-Balah, Khan Younis and Rafah are all in a Phase 4 or the “Emergency Phase” and in the worst-case scenario face the “risk of famine through July 2024,” according to the report.

“Between mid-March and mid-July, in the most likely scenario and under the assumption of an escalation of the conflict including a ground offensive in Rafah, half of the population of the Gaza Strip (1.11 million people) is expected to face catastrophic conditions (IPC Phase 5),” the report warned.

Scarce supplies mean that “virtually all households are skipping meals every day” and adults are going without so their children can eat, the report said. In two-thirds of households in northern Gaza, people “went entire days and nights without eating at least 10 times in the last 30 days,” the report found. “In the southern governorates, this applies to one third of the households.”

Famine could be halted if aid organizations are allowed full access to Gaza to bring food, water and other supplies to the civilian population, the report said

For this to happen, a ceasefire is needed immediately, it said.

But Netanyahu has vowed to push ahead with a planned ground offensive in Rafah, which has been under Israeli bombardment for weeks and where an estimated 1.5 million Palestinians are now sheltering.

International alarm is mounting over the pending operation, with fears that further escalation of violence will lead to more deaths and suffering, and exacerbate the hunger crisis.

On Monday, US President Joe Biden [voiced “deep concerns”](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/18/politics/joe-biden-netanyahu-phone-call/index.html) over Rafah in a phone call with Netanyahu, according to Biden’s top national security official.

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said Biden sought to explain to Netanyahu why the plan for Rafah could prove catastrophic for Palestinian civilians and hamper the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza.

The concerns fall within three areas: that civilians sheltering in Rafah have nowhere safe to go; that Rafah is an entry point for critical humanitarian assistance; and that neighboring Egypt has voiced serious concerns about a potential military operation there, he said.

Sullivan said Israel has not presented a plan to the United States or the rest of the world on protecting Palestinian civilians in Rafah.

With aid deliveries on land [falling far short](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/11/middleeast/why-only-a-trickle-of-aid-is-getting-into-gaza-mime-intl/index.html) of the numbers needed to ward off famine in the enclave, it is hoped these airdrops will provide a lifeline to people in Gaza.

But the UN and aid agencies have questioned how effective they will be at alleviating the situation, and their risks were shown starkly on Friday when malfunctioning parachutes caused aid pallets to hurtle from the sky at breakneck speed, killing five unsuspecting civilians.

We’ve been taking a closer look at the use of airdrops in warzones.

**What are airdrops?**

The UN carried out its first airdrop in August 1973 and since then they have been used by aid agencies and governments  to deliver food to conflict zones across the globe.

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Packages of food and medicines are wrapped typically with six layers of packaging to provide protection and sewn together using a handheld stitching machine. Agencies use different colors  to denote the contents of the packages with the World Food Programme using white for cereals, red for pulses and blue or green for specialized nutritious food.

Packages are then loaded onto aircraft before being dropped via parachute anywhere from 300 to up to 5,600 meters above, [according to the World Food Programme (WFP).](https://www.wfp.org/stories/airdrops-humanitarian-emergency-un-world-food-programme-sudan-syria)

This is not the first time the US government has carried out airdrops over conflict zones. In 2001, the US dropped food packets over Afghanistan accompanied by leaflets explaining how civilians could tell the difference between airdrops and cluster bombs. In 2014, when Islamic State was at its peak in Iraq, the US dropped aid into areas where food and water supplies had been cut.

**Do they work?**

Airdrops evade the often rigorous examinations carried out at land checkpoints, so are undoubtedly a speedy way of getting supplies into a conflict zone.

But despite this advantage, aid agencies say their drawbacks overwhelmingly outweigh their benefits.

For starters, they are more expensive.Airdrops cost up to seven times as much as land deliveries, the WFP says. They also have much more limited delivery capacity.  [For example, one truck is capable of delivering nearly 10 times the amount one aircraft could deliver- roughly 20 to 30 metric tonnes, according to the UN.](https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gaza-children-are-dying-hunger-says-un-aid-coordinator-enar)

“Humanitarian workers always complain that airdrops are good photo opportunities but a lousy way to deliver aid,”

Experts have also questioned whether countries  have plans in place for the aid once it reaches the ground. TheUN special rapporteur for food, Michael Fakrhi says airdrops usually culminate in chaos.

“You’re throwing aid into the wind to people who’ve been starving and have been denied humanitarian access. This will create chaos, predictably, and we cannot blame the people for that,” Fakrhi said Friday.

The US administration has acknowledged the pitfalls of airdrops with White House spokesperson John Kirby telling CNN Tuesday that they are “not an ideal way of getting aid” to people in Gaza.  “They [airdrops] are certainly an indication of how desperate things are that we are now going to have to resort to airdrops,” Kirby continued.

Palestinians have voiced some practical concerns. Mahmoud Shalabi who is senior program manager of NGO, Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), said some meals needed microwaves when “we don’t even have electricity right now.” Speaking from the city of  Beit Lahia in northern Gaza, Shalabi said most packages have only contained enough food for just two to three meals.

A Palestinian journalist based in northern Gaza, Abdel Qader Al Sabbah said the wrong type of meals were being sent, calling instead for “flour, rice, oil, salt, and other seeds and beans, so people here can benefit from these and prepare several meals.”

**So why are airdrops being carried out?**

Aid agencies have consistently said not enough aid is reaching Gaza.

Even before the war, Israel restricted access and to and from Gaza, stringently controlling the entry of goods through land crossings. After Israel imposed a “complete siege” on Gaza following the October 7 attacks controls have significantly tightened further.

Israel has been carrying out security checks on goods entering its own crossing into Gaza, Kerem Shalom but also on goods that passed through Israeli crossings before transiting onto Egypt’s entry point into Gaza, the Rafah crossing.

[A CNN investigation found evidence](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/01/middleeast/gaza-aid-israel-restrictions-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html) of goods being subject to arbitrary and contradictory controls as authorities strive to prevent the entry of “dual use goods” which they say could can also be used to “serve military needs for the strengthening of Hamas.”

An average of 95 aid trucks per day entered Gaza between October 10 and February 1, [according to the Palestinian Red Crescent,](https://twitter.com/PalestineRCS/status/1754239103996969299?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1754239103996969299%7Ctwgr%5Ebda3a338cb5389ee55a3df4f94ecac4818889a36%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.palestinechronicle.com%2Fthis-is-the-number-of-aid-trucks-that-enter-devastated-gaza-on-a-daily-basis-prcs%2F) down from 500 commercial and aid trucks a day before the war. It is the challenges of getting aid via road that has prompted countries to carry out recent airdrops, to the dismay of organizations such as the UN who say they should only be used when all other options have been exhausted.

“When countries use airdrops and these maritime piers is usually if not always in situations when you want to deliver humanitarian aid into enemy territory. That’s when you use these methods of last resort,” Special Rapporteur for Food, Michael Fakhri said Friday.

Israel has denied claims it is limiting aid into Gaza, telling CNN in a recent statement that the country “assists, encourages and facilitates the entry of humanitarian aid for the residents of the Gaza Strip.”

A former US Aid official, Dave Harden, described airdrops to Gaza as [“dangerous” and “expensive” ventures which are “primarily for the Biden administration’s benefit - to paper over a massive policy failure.”](https://x.com/Dave_Harden/status/1763557151304282160?s=20)

As the threat of famine looms larger and larger, aid agencies such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) are calling on the US to instead focus on pressuring Israel to allow more aid into Gaza via road.

“This is not a logistics problem; it is a political problem. Rather than look to the US military to build a work-around, the US should insist on immediate humanitarian access using the roads and entry points that already exist,”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday refused to answer whether he would take responsibility for failing to prevent the [October 7 attack on Israel](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/al-aqsa-storm-militants-infiltrate-israel-after-gaza-rockets-10-07-intl-hnk/index.html), saying that there would be time for such “difficult” questions once the war is over.

In an interview with CNN’s Dana Bash, Netanyahu acknowledged that it is “a question that needs to be asked,” but that the country for now needs to unite around the goal of defeating Hamas – the militant group that controls Gaza and launched the assault on Israel.

“We’re going to answer all these questions,” the prime minister said, adding that, “Right now, I think what we have to do is unite the country for one purpose; to achieve victory.

“Let’s focus on victory – that’s my responsibility now.”

Netanyahu has been criticized for failing to anticipate the deadliest attack on Israel since the country’s founding in 1948, when Hamas militants killed more than 1,200 people and took more than 200 hostages last month, according to Israeli authorities.

Ad Feedback

During a Saturday demonstration in Tel Aviv, families of hostages held by the militant group in Gaza called on Netanyahu and the government to do more to secure the release of their loved ones.

The prime minister told CNN Sunday that Israel is doing all it can “around the clock” to release the hostages, saying it is one of his two war goals, along with the destruction of Hamas.

He also reiterated his stance regarding international calls for a ceasefire, saying the only halt in fighting he would accept is “one in which we have our hostages released.”

For days, tens of thousands of Gazans have fled to the south of the enclave using temporary evacuation corridors. Asked if he would allow days-long pauses, Netanyahu told CNN, “that’s not a pause.”

“If you’re talking about stopping the fighting, that’s exactly what Hamas wants,” Netanyahu said, arguing that Hamas would use those extended pauses to replenish its supplies.

“Hamas wants an endless series of pauses that basically dissipate the battle against them,” he said.

**‘No reason why we can’t just take the patients out of there’**

Since the October 7 attacks, Israel has been bombarding Gaza, killing at least 11,025 Palestinians, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah, which draws figures from the Hamas-controlled territory.

This toll includes 4,506 children and 3,027 women, according to the ministry, which said that over 27,000 other individuals have sustained injuries.

Asked about hospitals in Gaza that health officials and aid agencies say are suffering a “[catastrophic situation](https://cms.cnn.com/2023/11/11/middleeast/babies-die-neonatal-gaza-hospital-complete-siege?brand-site=cnn&language=en&agent=any%C2%AEion=any),” as Israel’s ground offensive moves forward in northern Gaza, Netanyahu told CNN that Israel is helping patients by establishing safe corridors on the ground, but insisted that “no immunity” will be given to Hamas.

“We have designated routes to a safe zone south of Gaza City,” he said. “We want all civilians to be moved out of harm’s way.”

Netanyahu blamed Hamas for the civilian casualties and said that “100 or so” have already been evacuated from Al-Shifa hospital, Gaza’s largest healthcare facility. “There’s no reason why we can’t just take the patients out of there,” he said.

CNN cannot verify those claims. Israel earlier on Sunday announced a corridor near Al-Shifa Hospital, but the International Committee of the Red Cross said it could not confirm if any evacuations had taken place.

Palestinian authorities in Gaza and the West Bank claimed the Israeli military had fired at people who moved between hospital buildings — an allegation the Israeli military has denied.

**Post-war Gaza**

With fighting raging, it remains a major open question about who will run post-war Gaza.

[This week, the US](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/05/world/blinken-abbas-west-bank-intl/index.html) suggested that the Palestinian Authority – which exercises limited self-rule in the occupied West Bank – could play a role.

Netanyahu said Israel’s security role in a post-war Gaza would be an “over-riding, over-reaching military envelope,” but did not explain what that meant.

It would be accompanied by “a reconstructed civilian authority … some kind of civilian Palestinian Authority” in control of Gaza that is “willing to fight the terrorists” and educate children for a “future of peace, cooperation, prosperity, cooperation with Israel,” and “not the annihilation of Israel.”

“So far, that hasn’t happened,” he added.

“There has to be something else. Otherwise we’re just falling into that same rabbit hole and we’re going to have the same result. Remember the PA [Palestinian Authority] was already in Gaza,” Netanyahu continued.

The PA used to run both Gaza and the West Bank but was ousted after a brief civil war with Hamas.

The world must “must act urgently” to stem the conflict in Gaza, China’s top diplomat said Monday during a meeting with officials from Arab and Muslim majority nations, as Beijing steps up its efforts to play a role in establishing a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi welcomed counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, the Palestinian National Authority, and Indonesia, as well as the head of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation for a two-day visit to the Chinese capital, the start of the delegation’s expected tour of several world capitals.

“The international community must act urgently, taking effective measures to prevent this tragedy from spreading. China firmly stands with justice and fairness in this conflict,” Wang told the visiting leaders in opening remarks ahead of talks, where he reiterated China’s call for an immediate ceasefire.

Visiting ministers voiced their own strong calls for an end to the conflict, with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud saying: “The message is clear: the war must stop immediately, we must move to a ceasefire immediately, and relief materials and aid must enter immediately.”

Countries represented in the delegation hoped to cooperate with China and “all countries” that are “responsible and appreciate the seriousness of the situation,” he said.

Israel has launched weeks of bombardment and ground operations in the Hamas-ruled enclave of Gaza following a deadly attack on its territory by the group on October 7. More than 200 hostages were taken in that attack, according to the Israel Defense Forces.

The gathering in Beijing comes as sources tell CNN that a possible deal to [secure the release of some hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/19/politics/hamas-hostage-release-deal-pending/index.html) held by Hamas and a several days pause in fighting may be in sight, following weeks of negotiations between the United States, Israel and the militant group, mediated by Gulf state Qatar.

Beijing has been at odds with Washington – an Israeli ally and long a major power broker in the region – over their approach to the conflict, including when it comes to an immediate ceasefire, which Washington does not support. Beijing has also criticized Israel’s retaliation and failed to condemn Hamas or name the group in its statements, sparking backlash from Israeli officials.

“Israel should stop its collective punishment on the people of Gaza, and open up a humanitarian corridor as soon as possible to prevent a humanitarian crisis of a larger scale from taking place,” Wang was cited as telling the delegation during the talks, according to a readout from China’s Foreign Ministry.

Israel has staunchly defended its actions as rooting out terrorism following a “barbaric invasion” and has [rejected any ceasefire](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/17/politics/hamas-israel-drones-hostage-negotiations/index.html) without the return of hostages.

**China’s push for peace**

China has been attempting to play an active role in finding a solution to the conflict as it seeks to expand its position as a major global power.

Beijing dispatched a peace envoy for a multi-country tour of the region last month and has acted as a strong voice pushing for an immediate ceasefire at the United Nations, including the Security Council, where China now holds the rotating presidency.

Last week the UN body passed its [first resolution](https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1143632) on the conflict, which called for the immediate release of all hostages held by Hamas and for extended humanitarian corridors throughout the enclave to protect civilians. The US and the United Kingdom abstained, citing the resolution’s failure to condemn Hamas.

“For reasons known to all, in particular, the repeated and persistent obstruction of a permanent member of the Council, this resolution at present can only serve as a first step based on minimum consensus,” Chinese Ambassador Zhang Jun [said](http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zt/202311/202311/t20231116_11181215.htm) following the vote, in an apparent veiled jab at the US.

In his comments Monday in Beijing, Saudi Arabia’s minister commended the Security Council’s decision, under China’s leadership.

The conflict has also given China an opportunity to bolster its already strengthening ties with a number of countries across the Arab world — a region where observers say it hopes to drive a wedge between the US and the countries with which it has long-standing ties.

“We have always firmly defended the legitimate rights and interests of Arab and Muslim countries, and have always firmly supported the Palestinian people’s efforts to restore their legitimate national rights and interests,” Wang told the visiting delegation.

**Engaging major players?**

Immediate ceasefire and longer-term peace were also key topics during a roughly 10-day tour in the Middle East last month from China’s special envoy for the region, Zhai Jun, who visited Egypt, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, according to China’s Foreign Ministry.

Last week the envoy visited and met with officials in Turkey and Bahrain, where Zhai also discussed the “regional situation” with representatives from Singapore, the US and Europe on the sidelines of an international conference.

So far there have been no apparent concrete outcomes from the diplomacy.

Zhai’s itinerary thus far has also not included stops in Israel, Palestinian-controlled territories, or Iran, per information released by China’s Foreign Ministry. Wang spoke with Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen on the phone last month. It’s not clear if China has been in contact with Hamas officials during the latest conflict.

Visiting officials in Beijing this week include Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki of the West Bank-based Palestinian National Authority.

China earlier this month dispatched the head of its Foreign Ministry’s West Asian and North African affairs department to Iran, where the conflict was part of discussions, according to a post on the department’s WeChat social media account.

Iran is a longtime backer of both Hamas and Lebanon-based Hezbollah.

During hours-long talks between Chinese leader Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden in California last week, Biden encouraged Xi to use China’s leverage with Iran to warn against a wider regional escalation, a senior US official told CNN.

In the talks, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said they’d already held discussions with the Iranians on the topic, the senior official said.

Biden also made clear to Xi that he viewed Hamas as separate from the Palestinians. The US views Hamas as a terrorist organization that has perpetuated the suffering of Palestinian people, and has upheld Israel’s right to retaliate against the group.

Beijing has not referred to Hamas in its statements, but instead frames the current situation as a Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Speaking to reporters in Washington Monday, State Department spokesperson Matt Miller said the US “would welcome China playing a constructive role in the Middle East.”

Secretary of State Antony Blinken had “made this clear personally” in conversations with China’s Wang,

Talks over a hostage deal and a ceasefire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas have reached another stalemate but are not over, according to three people familiar with the negotiations.

A diplomat described the talks as “stuck but ongoing,” saying that there continues to be “proposals going back and forth.” A second source confirmed the parties are still engaged but said the negotiations are in a “pause.”

There was no breakthrough after CIA Director Bill Burns traveled to Doha late last week to meet with Israeli, Egyptian and Qatari counterparts. Burns put forward a proposal that was accepted by Israel and sent back to Hamas, the second person and an Israeli official told CNN.

On Tuesday morning, Israel was informed that proposal was rejected by Hamas, the Israeli official said, and Israel decided to pull back the team of negotiators that had remained in Doha after Burns and Israel’s Mossad chief, David Barnea, had left Qatar.

“The negotiations are not only centric around the prisoner exchange deal,” Hamas senior official Basem Naeim told CNN on Monday. “Israel has not agreed to any of (Hamas) requests related to a complete ceasefire, the withdrawal of all forces from the Gaza Strip, even in stages, and the return of all displaced people to their homes.”

In the latest talks, Israel had agreed to release around 700 Palestinian prisoners – including many with life sentences – in exchange for 40 Israeli hostages held in Gaza, the Israeli official and the source familiar with the discussions said. Those releases would take place during the first phase of a ceasefire, which would be expected to last around six weeks.

But other major discussion points – for just the first phase – are still being fiercely debated: the ability for Gazans in the south to return home to the north, a surge of humanitarian aid for Gaza and the locations of Israeli troops.

Hamas has regularly taken a more maximalist approach to what is expected to be a three-phase deal: demanding eventual discussions on an end to the war and the full withdrawal of IDF troops from Gaza. Israel has refused to engage on either point, insisting on the need to continue efforts to dismantle Hamas.

The Israeli official said that Hamas didn’t counter their latest proposal that around 2,000 Palestinians be allowed to go back to the north per day, instead saying all the displaced Gazans should be allowed to return. Hamas again argued all IDF troops should leave Gaza, including from the new checkpoint road Israel has built that cuts across the middle of the enclave.

The National Security Council declined a request for comment Wednesday.

American officials have said this week that progress was made during the weekend talks in Doha. The process is complex and slow, one US official argued, in part because the Hamas negotiators need to get responses from the head of the group in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, who is believed to be somewhere in the vast underground tunnel system.

On Tuesday, State Department Spokesman Matthew Miller criticized the [argument](https://twitter.com/IsraeliPM/status/1772565286127861896?s=20) by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office that Hamas rejected the American ceasefire proposal in light of the United Nations Security Council’s passage of a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire, [which the US did not veto](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/25/middleeast/un-security-council-gaza-israel-ceasefire-intl/index.html).

“That statement is inaccurate in almost every respect, and it is unfair to the hostages and their families,” Miller said.

The inability to achieve a ceasefire could accelerate Israel’s plans to launch a largescale ground offensive into the southern Gaza city of Rafah. The US has repeatedly warned Israel against an operation without a coherent plan for the safety of the 1.4 million Palestinians sheltering there, which the Biden administration says it has not heard.

Israel’s defense minister, Yoav Gallant, [visited Washington this week](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/25/politics/yoav-gallant-lloyd-austin-meeting/index.html) for a whirlwind series of meetings with top Biden national security officials, including an unannounced meeting with the CIA director on Tuesday night.

The senior US officials and Gallant did not reach any agreements on how Israel will move forward with an operation in Rafah in southern Gaza, US and Israeli officials told CNN.

Gallant was told that Israel needs to find an “alternative” option to a major assault of Rafah. Israeli officials said Gallant was open to the US’ recommendations about how to proceed with an attack on Hamas in Rafah, but ultimately Israeli officials said they will execute the plan they think is necessary to eliminate the remaining five Hamas battalions in the area

In a series of interviewswith key Israeli players conducted in collaboration with Israeli investigative journalism organization [Shomrim](https://www.shomrim.news/english), CNN was told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continued the cash flow to Hamas, despite concerns raised from within his own government.

Qatar has vowed not to stop those payments. Qatari minister of state for foreign affairs Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi told CNN’s Becky Anderson on Monday that his government will continue to make payments to Gaza to support the enclave, as it has been doing for years.

“We’re not going to change our mandate. Our mandate is our continuous help and support for our brothers and sisters of Palestine. We will continue to do it systematically as we did it before,” Al-Khulaifi said.

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Israeli sources responded by pointing out that successive governments had facilitated the transfer of money to Gaza for humanitarian reasons and that Netanyahu had acted decisively against Hamas after the October 7 attacks.

Here’s what we know about those payments and Israel’s role in facilitating them.

**When did the Qatari payments start?**

In 2018, Qatar began making monthly payments to the Gaza Strip. Some $15 million were sent into Gaza in cash-filled suitcases – delivered by the Qataris through Israeli territory after months of negotiation with Israel.

The payments started after the Palestinian Authority (PA), the Palestinian government in the Israeli occupied West Bank that is a rival of Hamas, decided to cut salaries of government employees in Gaza in 2017, an Israeli government source with knowledge of the matter told CNN at the time.

The PA opposed the Qatari funding at the time, which Hamas said was meant for the payment of public salaries as well as medical purposes.

Israel approved the deal in a security cabinet meeting in August 2018, when Netanyahu was serving his previous tenure as premier.

Even then, Netanyahu was criticized by his coalition partners for the deal and for being too soft on Hamas.

The prime minister defended the initiative at the time, saying the deal was made “in coordination with security experts to return calm to (Israeli) villages of the south, but also to prevent a humanitarian disaster (in Gaza).”

Ahmad Majdalani, an Executive Committee member at the Palestine Liberation Organization in the West Bank, accused the United States of orchestrating the payment.

The US was aware of the Qatari payments to Hamas, a former senior State Department official involved in the region told CNN on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.

Qatar was prepared to provide funds to the Gaza Strip through Hamas as early as the 2014 Israel-Hamas war to alleviate the humanitarian crisis there, the official said, and the US at the time left it up to the Israelis to decide whether they would permit this.

“We deferred completely to the Israelis as to whether this was something they wanted to do or not,” the official said.

**Why did Israel back the payments?**

Israeli and international media have reported that Netanyahu’s plan to continue allowing aid to reach Gaza through Qatar was in the hope that it might make Hamas an effective counterweight to the PA and [prevent the establishment](https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-years-netanyahu-propped-up-hamas-now-its-blown-up-in-our-faces/) of a Palestinian state.

PA officials said at the time the cash transfers encouraged division between Palestinian factions.

Major General Amos Gilad, a former senior Israeli Defense Ministry official, told CNN the plan was backed by the prime minister, but not by the Israeli intelligence community. There was also some belief that it would “weaken Palestinian sovereignty,” he said. There was also an illusion, he added, that “if you fed them (Hamas) with money, they would be tamed.”

Shlomo Brom, a former deputy to Israel’s national security adviser, [told the New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/10/world/middleeast/israel-qatar-money-prop-up-hamas.html) that an empowered Hamas helped Netanyahu avoid negotiating over a Palestinian state, saying the division of the Palestinians helped him make the case that he had no partner for peace in the Palestinians, thus avoiding pressure for peace talks that could lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

The former State Department official said that after the 2014 war, Israel felt it was better off with Hamas controlling Gaza as opposed to multiple Islamist groups, or leaving it in a political vacuum.

“It was our impression that the Israelis were comfortable with keeping Hamas in power in a weakened form,” the official said. “Our understanding was that Hamas was the lesser of a whole bunch of bad options in Gaza,” the official added, noting that at least the competing PA could keep Hamas out of the West Bank.

Naftali Bennett, a former Israeli prime minister, told CNN Sunday that after years of flagging his concerns to the Netanyahu government when he was minister of education, he stopped the suitcase cash transfers when he became prime minister in 2021.

“I stopped the cash suitcases because I believe that horrendous mistake – to allow Hamas to have all these suitcases full of cash, that goes directly to reordering themselves against Israelis. Why would we feed them cash to kill us?” Bennett asked.

The cash payments stopped, but the transfer of funds to Gaza continued under Bennett’s leadership, according to the New York Times.

An Israeli official told CNN that any suggestion that Netanyahu wanted to maintain a “moderately weakened” Hamas was “utterly false” and that he had acted to weaken Hamas “significantly.”

“He led three powerful military operations against Hamas which killed thousands of terrorists and senior Hamas commanders,” the official said. “Successive Israeli governments before, during and after Netanyahu’s governments enabled money to go to Gaza. Not in order to strengthen Hamas but to prevent a humanitarian crisis by supporting critical infrastructure, including water and sewage systems to prevent the spread of disease and enable daily life.”

**Has Netanyahu faced a backlash?**

Netanyahu has come under increasing criticism as the depth of his government’s involvement in the move, as well as the motivations for it, come to light again.

The funding deal is one reason why many Israelis today place part of the blame for the October 7 Hamas terror attack on Netanyahu personally. Numerous people told CNN they believed that allowing the payments made Hamas stronger and, ultimately, made the brutal attacks worse.

“The premier’s policy of treating the terror group as a partner, at the expense of (Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud) Abbas and Palestinian statehood, has resulted in wounds that will take Israel years to heal from,” wrote Tal Schneider in an opinion piece in the Times of Israel on October 8, a day after Hamas’ devastating attack.

Gilad, the former Israeli defense official, said he was among those to argue against allowing money to reach Hamas, saying the permitted cash flow over the years was a “dramatic, tragic mistake.”

With the funds, “they could take care of the population. They could take care of the military enhancement, and build up their capabilities,” Gilad said last week.

Criticism of Netanyahu among Israelis soared after the attack, with many blaming the prime minister for failing to prevent it.

**What backlash has Qatar faced?**

Qatar maintains close ties with both Hamas and Western states, including the United States. It has come under harsh criticism for allowing the Iran-backed group to establish a political office in Doha, which has been operative since 2012.

But it has also proven useful to Israel, having played [a leading role](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/qatar-mediation-israel-hamas-intl/index.html) in the release of hostages kidnapped on October 7 and held by Hamas in Gaza.

But some Israeli officials have pointed to Qatar as among those responsible for the attack, saying the Gulf Arab state is supporting Hamas.

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen accused Qatar of financing Hamas and harboring its leaders in October.

“Qatar, which finance and harbor of Hamas’ leaders, could influence and enable the immediate and unconditional release of all, of all hostages held by the terrorists. You, members of the international community should demand Qatar to do just that,” Cohen said at a high-level UN meeting.

[Qatar has rejected](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/qatar-mediation-israel-hamas-intl/index.html) accusations made by Israeli officials, warning that “these provocative statements” could undermine mediation efforts and even “endanger lives.”

Gilad also blamed Qatar, saying the Gulf state “gave Hamas 1 billion shekels per year ($30 million per month)… and they have used it to enhance, to cement their grip on Gaza “For them (Hamas), it was like a relief. It was like oxygen,” he told CNN.

Qatar denies that those funds were intended for Hamas, saying they are meant as aid to pay salaries of workers in the besieged enclave.

The State Department official said that while the US has always been wary of Qatar’s ties with Hamas, as well as with the criticism from both inside and outside the US about sending money to Gaza through the militant group, it was clear that Qatar had “the most leverage” with the group.

The Gulf nation, which hosts a major US airbase, has also come under pressure in Congress. A bipartisan group of 113 US lawmakers sent a letter to President Joe Biden on October 16 asking him to put pressure on countries who support Hamas, including Qatar.

Al-Khulaifi, the Qatari minister who leads his country’s mediation in the Israel-Hamas war, said that his country “will continue to engage with regional and international partners to make sure that those funds reach out could have the most vulnerable and to the important and vital infrastructure.”

The Israeli prime minister said Wednesday that Israeli forces had surrounded the house of Yahya Sinwar, potentially closing in on the top Hamas official in Gaza – and the man most wanted by Israeli authorities.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said Sinwar was not in the house and was believed to be [hiding underground](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-06-23/h_4fa78a42412da948c356fffcbc6d8825) in Gaza, but a senior adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday that it was “only a matter of time before we get him.”

Israelhas publicly accused Sinwar of being the “mastermind” behind Hamas’ terror attack against Israel on October 7 – though experts say he is likely one of several – making him one of the key targets of its war in Gaza.

A longtime figure in the Islamist Palestinian group, Sinwar was responsible for building up Hamas’ military wing before forging important new ties with regional Arab powers as the group’s civilian and political leader.

He was elected to [Hamas](https://ecfr.eu/mapping_palestinian_politics/detail/hamas)’ main decision-making body, the Politburo, in 2017 as the political leader of Hamas in Gaza branch. However, he has since become the Politburo’s de facto leader, according to research by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

He has been designated a global terrorist by the US Department of State since 2015, and has been recently sanctioned by the United Kingdom and France.

Harel Chorev, senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, said that while Sinwar is a key player within Hamas, he shouldn’t be seen as its sole leader.

“He is perceived as the most senior one because he has a very high public profile, but Hamas doesn’t work this way,” he said. “Hamas is a decentralized organization with several separate power centers and he is one of them.”

Chorev said that while Sinwar is a prominent figure, he is one of a “triumvirate” of Hamas officials responsible for the October 7 attack, along with Mohammed al-Masri, popularly known as Mohammed Deif, the commander of the Al-Qassam Brigades, the military arm of Hamas, and Deif’s deputy, Marwan Issa.

Sinwar, with his silver head of hair and dark eyes set deep under prominent eyebrows, is by far the best known and most recognizable of the three, but it was Deif who announced the October 7 attacks.

But while Sinwar has spent the past few years giving speeches and being photographed, Deif is an extremely secretive, shadowy figure who hasn’t been seen in public in decades

**‘Dead man walking’**

Sinwar was born in 1962 in a refugee camp in Khan Younis, southern Gaza. His family was displaced from [Al-Majdal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkelon), a Palestinian village in modern day Askhelon, during the Arab-Israeli war.

He joined Hamas in the late 1980s and became one of the founders of its feared internal intelligence apparatus, known as the Majd.

He was convicted in 1988 of playing a role in the murder of two Israeli soldiers and four Palestinians suspected of collaboration with Israel, and spent more than two decades in Israeli prison.

Sinwar later said he had spent those years studying his enemy, including learning to speak Hebrew.

He was released in 2011 as part of the deal that saw more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners exchanged for Gilad Shalit, an IDF soldier who had been captured and taken to Gaza, where he was held for more than five years.

At that time, Sinwar called the exchange “one of the big strategic monuments in the history of our cause.”

Chorev said his release was helped by the fact that his brother was one of Shalit’s kidnappers and insisted on him being included in the deal.

Back in Gaza, Sinwar has risen through the ranks and quickly became a key player within Hamas. Chorev said he became known for his brutality and the violence he inflicts on anyone he suspects of betrayal or collaboration.

“It is well known that while in prison, he tortured people, mostly members of Hamas, using (a) hot plate to cause them burns… his role in the Majd really tells you a lot about his character, his cruelty. But at the same time, Israelis who met him said that he can also be very practical, openly discussing options,” Chorev said.

As the political leader of Hamas, Sinwar focused on the group’s foreign relationships. According to the ECFR, he was responsible for restoring Hamas’ relationship with Egyptian leaders who were wary of the group’s support for political Islam, and for pulling in continued military funding from Iran.

Sinwar was considered a vital decisionmaker and likely the main point of contact within Gaza during the intense negotiations over the return of the more than 240 hostages taken into the enclave by Hamas in the October 7 attacks. The talks involved senior figures from Israel, Hamas, the United States, Qatar and Egypt.

“At the end of the day there are two people” atop the negotiations, said Gershon Baskin, a well-known Israeli peace activist involved in the 2011 release of Shalit, the Israeli soldier. “One is Yahya Sinwar on the Hamas side, and the other is Benjamin Netanyahu on the Israeli side.”

More than 100 Israeli and foreign hostages were released by Hamas and 240 Palestinian prisoners and detainees released by Israel as part of a truce won in those talks, before the temporary ceasefire collapsed on December 1, with Israel and Hamas blaming each other for the failure.

Sinwar has been called many things over the past two months: Israeli military spokesman Lt. Col. Richard Hecht called Sinwar the “face of evil” and declared him a “dead man walking.” Israeli media compared him to Osama bin Laden, while a profile published by the IDF nicknamed him “the Butcher from Khan Younis.”

But Chorev said that despite his position in the spotlight, Sinwar is just one of many commanders Israel needs to remove before it can say it has “destroyed Hamas.”

“To put it simply, if Israel will kill Sinwar, it doesn’t mean necessarily that it will topple down Hamas. However, Hamas can still be toppled down even if Sinwar stays alive … because it’s not (a hierarchical organization). In order for Israel to destroy Hamas, it needs to destroy a critical mass of power centers, not just him,” he said.

The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon appears to be largely holding, despite accusations of violations from both sides of the border.

US President Joe Biden said the deal that took effect early Wednesday morning – raising hopes of a lasting respite after a 13-month [border conflict](https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/26/middleeast/israel-lebanon-ceasefire-deal-approve-hezbollah-intl/index.html) that spiraled into an all-out war in September – ﻿﻿“is designed to be a permanent cessation of hostilities.”

Since then, thousands of displaced Lebanese people have begun returning to their homes in the south, despite both Lebanon’s army and the Israeli military warning residents not to return home yet.

But a fragile and complicated process must still play out over the next 60 days, and it remains to be seen how permanent the pause will be in the long term.

Here’s what you need to know about the ceasefire and the weeks ahead.

**What the deal entails**

The deal stipulates a 60-day cessation of hostilities, which negotiators have described as the foundation of a lasting truce. During that time, Hezbollah fighters are expected to retreat some 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Israel-Lebanon border, while Israeli ground forces withdraw from Lebanese territory.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the last all-out war between the two countries in 2006, has been the basis of the deal and the negotiations have mainly revolved around the treaty’s enforcement.

Under the agreement, Lebanon would implement a more rigorous supervision of Hezbollah’s movements south of the country’s Litani river, to prevent militants from regrouping there. United Nations peacekeeping troops, the Lebanese military and a multinational committee will be tasked with supervising the Iran-backed group’s movements.

Israel has vowed to resume military operations in case of a breach of the agreement.

**Will the truce hold?**

The ceasefire agreement heralds much-needed respite for Lebanese civilians, hundreds of whom have been killed in Israeli airstrikes, as well as for Israelis, millions of whom have taken to shelters amid Hezbollah’s daily barrage of rocket fire.

Thousands of Lebanese have begun to travel back to their homes in the south, despite warnings from the Israeli and Lebanese governments not to return immediately.

Residents in the southern Lebanese town of Qlayaa were seen cheering and throwing rice in the air – a gesture of celebration – as a Lebanese regiment arrived in the town on Wednesday evening. Under the truce, the Lebanese military will ramp up its presence in the south to help preserve the peace.

But there are questions about how long the truce may hold. Israel insists that it will take military action in response to any breach of the agreement. That could reignite the conflict, putting US-backed diplomatic efforts in jeopardy.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah has agreed to withdraw its forces north of the Litani river, some 40 kilometers from the Israel-Lebanon frontier at its furthest point. It made that concession in 2006 but violated it, building a vast underground infrastructure in an area where its members are part of the social fabric. Israel also breached the 2006 agreement by conducting near daily overflights in Lebanon.

On Thursday, however, both countries in the agreement accused the other of violating it.

In a statement, Israel’s military that said that it had thwarted “terrorist activity” in “a facility used by Hezbollah to store mid-range rockets in southern Lebanon.”

Meanwhile, the Lebanese army said that Israel had breached the terms of the ceasefire agreement “several times” since it went into effect, through “aerial infiltrations and the targeting of Lebanese territory with various weapons.”

Dozens of people, including children, have been killed as “extremely intense” Israeli airstrikes and shelling pounded multiple locations in Rafah overnight Monday, according to the Palestine Red Crescent Society, as international alarm mounts over [Israel’s planned ground offensive](http://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-12-24/index.html) in the southern Gazan city.

More than 100 people were killed due to Israeli airstrikes as warplanes targeted different areas of the city and helicopters fired machine guns along the border areas, the PRCS said early Monday.

The Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza said 94 people lost their lives. CNN cannot independently verify either number. The discrepancy likely exists because the health ministry only updates death toll numbers after bodies have been identified. Both groups warned the figure was likely to rise and the PRCS said people remained trapped beneath the rubble.

The director of Abu Yousef Al-Najjar Hospital said medical facilities in Rafah “cannot handle the large number of injuries due to the Israeli occupation’s bombardment.”

Footage obtained by CNN showed a chaotic scene inside Rafah’s Al Kuwaiti hospital, with medics trying to resuscitate a motionless child in one scene and another showing doctors treating a wounded man on the hospital floor. In another video a woman was inconsolable as she held a child’s body wrapped in white cloth.

At least two mosques and around a dozen homes were targeted in the strikes, the Rafah municipality said Monday.

The Israeli military confirmed it conducted a “series of strikes” on what it said were targets in the Shaboura area of Rafah and that two Israeli hostages were rescued in a “special operation”.

In a joint statement, the Israel Defense Forces, Israel Security Agency Shin Bet and Police identified the hostages as Fernando Simon Marman, 60, and Louis Har, 70, and said they were kidnapped by Hamas on October 7 from Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak.

“They are both in good medical condition and were transferred for medical examination at the Sheba Tel Hashomer hospital,” the statement said.

IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari told reporters the “covert operation” to secure the hostages began at 1:49 a.m. local time, with the airstrikes on Rafah launching a minute later.

In a statement Monday, Hamas condemned what it said was a “horrific massacre” by Israel against civilians in Rafah.

The Israeli military’s attack on Rafah “and its horrific massacres against defenseless civilians and displaced children, women, and the elderly… is considered a continuation of the genocidal war and the forced displacement attempts it is waging against our Palestinian people,” Hamas said.

More than 1.3 million people — more than half of Gaza’s population — is seeking refuge in Rafah, with the majority of people displaced from other parts of the besieged enclave crammed into a sprawling tent city.

There are severe shortages of food, water, medicine and shelter, and the city [has been described](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/middleeast/palestinians-trapped-rafah-israeli-offensive-intl) as a “pressure cooker of despair” by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) spokesperson, Jens Laerke.

Rafah has experienced aerial assaults from Israeli forces for months, but Monday’s bombardment has heightened fears that an anticipated Israeli ground campaign would [result in a bloodbath](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/middleeast/palestinians-trapped-rafah-israeli-offensive-intl), with those trapped in the overcrowded city having no remaining escape route.

According to the Gazan health ministry, more than 28,100 people have been killed in the enclave since October 7.

**‘Last bastion’**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday directed the country’s military to plan for the “evacuation of the population” from Rafah after saying that the IDF would “soon go into Rafah, Hamas’s last bastion.”

His comments set off a firestorm of criticism, with Human Rights Watch saying forced displacement of Palestinians in Rafah would have “catastrophic consequences.” The United Nations said it was “extremely worried about the fate of civilians in Rafah,” according to UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric, who said people “need to be protected.”

A Hamas leadership source said that an assault on Rafah would mean the “destruction” of negotiations that have been ongoing for weeks, according to Hamas-run Al-Aqsa TV.

And Qatar, [Saudi Arabia,](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-11-24/h_5170e0330c6eb6e924e8955a51772713) Egypt and the United Kingdom joined a growing list of countries to express concern over Israel’s planned offensive.

Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry warned of “very serious repercussions of storming and targeting” the city, while Qatar — a key mediator in talks between Israel and Hamas — on Sunday urged the UN’s Security Council to “prevent” Israel from committing what it described as “genocide” and warned of a “humanitarian catastrophe in the city.”

In a call with Netanyahu on Sunday, US President Joe Biden “reaffirmed” his stance the IDF should not proceed with the military operation in Rafah “without a credible and executable plan” to ensure the safety of civilians, according to a White House release.

But Netanyahu has brushed off the criticism, saying that telling Israel not to enter the southern Gazan city [was like telling the country to lose the war.](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-11-24/h_de65d17cb1ce7610155732fe203f2b46)

“Victory is within reach. We’re going to do it. We’re going to get the remaining Hamas terrorist battalions in Rafah, which is the last bastion, but we’re going to do it,” Netanyahu told ABC News in an interview Sunday.

An Israeli official told CNN that Netanyahu [wants the Rafah operation completed](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-10-24/h_d688b3ae1cd0a0424c4995730e0d8540) by the start of Ramadan, expected to begin in early March

Netanyahu said Israel would provide safe passage for the civilian population but did not provide details on how that would happen. “We’re working out a detailed plan,” he said.

Many Palestinians fleeing Israeli bombs and shelling have trekked through the enclave and taken refuge in the city as the IDF’s campaign has moved south through Gaza.

It has rapidly become home to a huge population of displaced Palestinians. Satellite images showed last week how a tent city in Rafah has swelled in size in just a few weeks, as more Gazans descend on the area to escape the IDF’s campaign.

It is unclear where next they could go; the city borders Egypt to the south, but the border into the country has been closed for months.

**‘The dead are better than us’**

For the more than one million Palestinians in the southern city, the expected push into Rafah is causing alarm and fear.

“We are praying to God that what happened in Gaza City does not happen in Rafah because if the same happens in Rafah we will have no place to go,” Mohammad Jamal Abu Tour, a Palestinian living in Rafah, said.

“If we go to Gaza City or Khan Younis or El Nuseirat we are not going to find the supplies that were provided for us here in Rafah,” he added. “We keep hearing that in Gaza City they can’t find clean water and that they are eating grass, they drink from the sea, God help them.”

Mahmoud Khalil Amer, who was displaced from the Al Shati refugee camp in northern Gaza, said he stayed in a tent near a cemetery in Rafah. “We are not living, the dead are better than us,” he said.

Rafah is the last major population center in Gaza not occupied by the Israeli military.

Other cities stormed by the IDF in its mission to destroy Hamas have been turned into wastelands – a grim preview of what could be in store for Rafah.

People in the Tal El Hawa neighborhood of Gaza City described scenes of “total destruction” following Israeli operations in northern Gaza, with some people saying they have had to drink from toilets due to a lack of water.

“We were besieged. We tried to go back to the north, but we were besieged here,” Abdul Kareem Al-Qaseer told a journalist working for CNN. “Every day there were martyrs. Every day there was shelling. Every day there was hunger.”

“We even had to drink water from the toilets. We had to drink from it and make our children drink from it. There was no food, no drink,” he added.

Olfat Hamdan said she had witnessed dead bodies on the streets of Gaza City, noting that “nobody was able to drag them or move them.”

“What have I seen? Total destruction – look at of the scale of the destruction,” she said in a video commissioned by CNN, as she pointed to damaged buildings and rubble around her.

In the southern city of Khan Younis, where the Israeli military urged large numbers of civilians to flee in the early days of the war, the devastation witnessed by CNN was described as being [beyond imagination](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/middleeast/khan-younis-devastation/index.html).

Since the IDF focused its campaign on Khan Younis, many buildings have been completely destroyed and the rubble bulldozed away. The ones that are left standing appear damaged beyond any chance of repair. Some look like the ruins of medieval castles – lone walls with holes where windows used to be.

At the heart of crescendoing fears surrounding an Israeli ground offensive in Rafah is a large-scale human toll from a war that has already inflicted a catastrophic humanitarian crisis on the people of Gaza, including starvation, looming famine, a medical disaster, and the deaths of more than 28,100 Palestinians, according to information released by the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza.

Scattered around a huge crater are the remnants of a life that is gone. Random pieces of clothing and a red makeup bag lie in the mud. Nearby, an English language textbook, bits of broken furniture and a pillow with floral embroidery are jumbled together in one large pile.

The crater sits right in the middle of a residential neighborhood in central Khan Younis, the besieged city in southern Gaza that is the current epicenter of the war between Israel and Hamas.

The city is the hometown of Hamas’ leader in Gaza, [Yahya Sinwar](https://cnn.com/2023/12/07/middleeast/yahya-sinwar-profile-intl/index.html), and, according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), a major Hamas stronghold. It’s also an area to which the Israeli military urged large numbers of civilians to flee in the early days of the war, when northern Gaza was the focus of Israel’s operations.

Looking around, it’s clear that the IDF went into Khan Younis with full force.

According to the IDF, the crater is all that is left of a building similar to the others in the area. The military said it was flattened because it sat on top of an entrance to a [vast underground tunnel complex](https://cnn.com/2024/02/07/middleeast/gaza-underground-compound-israel-hamas-intl-cmd/index.html).

The IDF says the complex has been used by Sinwar and other Hamas officials to hide since the war began and some of the hostages kidnapped from Israel by Hamas on October 7 were held there. It’s not clear for how long.

CNN was among a small group of reporters granted a military escort by the Israeli army to see the tunnels. As a condition of entering Gaza under IDF escort, news outlets must submit photos and raw video footage to the Israeli military for review prior to publication. The IDF did not review this written report.

Being accompanied by the IDF meant the journalists were only able to see what it allowed them to see.

Even so, the devastation witnessed by CNN in Gaza was beyond imagination.

Driving from the border fence to the heart of Khan Younis in a military vehicle offered a limited vantage point, but there didn’t seem to be a single building that was untouched by the war.

Many buildings have been completely destroyed and the rubble bulldozed away. The ones that are left standing appear damaged beyond any chance of repair. Some look like the ruins of medieval castles – lone walls with holes where windows used to be.

The scale of the bulldozing is apparent when driving through. In some areas, the roads are lined with banks of rubble that are so high that the military vehicle is completely boxed in, driving below the “street level.” **Heavy price**

Early in the war, the Israeli military designated Khan Younis as a safer zone and told residents from northern Gaza to seek shelter there. But as the IDF pushed to the south, the city became its next focus. The IDF says Khan Younis is a Hamas stronghold, adding that the tunnel network underneath civilian buildings in the city was likely where Hamas planned the October 7 attacks from.

Hamas has denied hiding in hospitals and other civilian structures and CNN cannot independently verify either claim.

Local journalists have told CNN there were as many as 100,000 displaced people in United Nations-run shelters and other facilities in the area before the IDF issued evacuation orders last month.

Many had nowhere else to go and remained sheltering in medical centers and UN facilities in Khan Younis, including the Nasser Medical Complex, Al Amal Hospital and the Palestine Red Crescent Society headquarters. The UN said thousands are still there, and those [facilities have also come under attack](https://cnn.com/2024/01/30/middleeast/idf-khan-younis-hospital-intl/index.html), according to Hamas-run Palestinian health officials.

The IDF has repeatedly asserted that it seeks to minimize harm to civilians but has come under pressure from the United States and others to do more.

Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfuss is the commanding officer of the IDF’s 98th division, the unit that is leading the offensive in Khan Younis. He accompanied the small group of reporters, including CNN, on a tour of two Hamas tunnel compounds in the area.

Standing inside the massive crater in Khan Younis on Sunday, Goldfuss admitted the destruction was significant. But he blamed it on Hamas.

Goldfuss said the tunnel network was used by the Hamas leadership to plan the attacks in which Hamas and Islamic Jihad killed more than 1,200 people and abducted more than 250 others to Gaza. Some of the hostages are still likely being held inside the tunnels, he said

“I’ve (been) asked many questions about the price that Gaza, Khan Younis pays, the houses… yes, definitely, there is a price that has been paid,” Goldfuss said.

“But look around. We are in an ordinary neighborhood and there is a shaft in every place you can find. There’s a shaft in the kindergarten, there’s a shaft in the school, there’s a shaft in the mosques, there’s a shaft in the supermarket, everywhere you go,” he said.

CNN cannot verify Goldfuss’ claims because Israel doesn’t allow journalists to travel to Gaza independently. However, the tunnel complex visited by CNN on Sunday was under a residential area.

Even this limited glimpse of Gaza makes it clear that four months of Israeli military operations have completely transformed the enclave.

Seen from above, Gaza used to be green and gray: large swaths of fields alternating with densely populated cities. Now, satellite images show a land that’s mostly brown – bombed out and bulldozed over.

Displaced Palestinians crowded into tents in Rafah are waiting with dread for an anticipated Israeli ground assault on the city – with nowhere left to flee once troops move in.

One million people are estimated to be crammed into a tent city in the southern Gaza location, with satellite images showing that the [makeshift shelter is rapidly expanding](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-05-24/h_675a1f2d8ef5ce8a40f2ba5adff4785d).

Others are packed into houses in the city, where rocket attacks are already commonplace.

“We hear (drones) very, very loud, and we hear the sounds of bombing at night,” Kareem Dahman, a displaced Palestinian in the city, told CNN. The most recent bombing was “very close” to where Dahman lives, with more than a dozen family members in a single room of a friend’s house, he said.

He said conditions in Rafah are “very difficult,” describing a “large number of people, chaos, and high prices.”

Dahman, like countless others, found himself in the city after a “very arduous” journey through the besieged enclave. Rafah was the last refuge for Palestinians trekking south to avoid Israel’s air and ground campaigns, following orders from Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officials for Palestinians to leave Gaza City, and then Khan Younis, as their ground campaign moved further south.

Rafah has experienced aerial assaults from Israeli forces for months, but the new anticipated ground campaign brings with it heightened fears of a bloodbath.

Those trapped in the city have no remaining escape route. The city borders Egypt, and the crossing into that country has been closed for months.

“We were buying some supplies from a small grocery store. The last time we bought from it was yesterday,” Dahman told CNN. “In the morning, we went to buy things and found it had been bombed.”

“The bombing is getting closer slowly in Rafah,” he said. “We do not know where we will go after Rafah.”

**‘Everyone is afraid’**

Israeli leaders have set their sights on Rafah in recent days, claiming the city is the last remaining Hamas stronghold and that the militant group’s leadership, including Gaza leader Yahya Sinwar, is “on the run.”

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on Monday said the military would “soon achieve its goals” as it pushed into Rafah.

Gallant claimed in a televised briefing that Sinwar had no contact with his fighters and was forced to flee from one hideout to another with the IDF in close pursuit. “He is not leading the forces; he is busy with his own personal survival. He became, instead of the head of Hamas, a fugitive terrorist,” Gallant said.

But the top commander in charge of Israel’s military operation in southern Gaza has said that there is no plan in place yet for how to minimize civilian deaths in Rafah.

Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfuss, who oversees the Israel Defense Forces’ 98th Division, said on Sunday he would work on such a “if and when” he receives the order to maneuver his forces into the area, and that as of Sunday, the order had not been issued yet.

An IDF spokesperson told CNN that as of Wednesday, the information was still accurate – an order to move into Rafah has not been issued yet.

For the more than one million Palestinians in the southern city, the expected push into Rafah is causing alarm and fear.

“Everyone is afraid of the expanding of the ground operation in Rafah,” Raed Al-Nims, Media Director of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society in Gaza, [said on Monday.](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-05-24/h_6cdabe39527fe65f4ace2c828f786b89)

Ismail Al-Thawabta, the head of the Hamas-run Government Media Office in Gaza, told CNN on Monday that the IDF’s entry into Rafah “will cause a real disaster on top of the disasters to which the Gaza Strip is exposed.”

More than half of the estimated more than 2 million people in Gaza are seeking refuge in the Rafah area, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). OCHA said Monday that refugees facing acute shortages of food, water, shelter and medicine are still pouring into Rafah as fighting worsens nearby.

“We buy food and drink on a daily basis, which are canned foods of beans and meat. Water is available but we need an hour to fill water from a water station,” Dahman told CNN.

“Electricity is almost non-existent,” he added, a fact which makes it difficult for Palestinians to see communications regarding the IDF’s approach. “We charge our phones using solar energy which is available at our friend’s house in Rafah,” he said. “There is no phone signal except on the Israeli and Egyptian networks.”

Dahman and his family left Gaza City in mid-October, days after Hamas’ October 7 attacks on Israel sparked an IDF bombardment on the city. In November, they went to Khan Younis, before again being uprooted in December and heading to Rafah.

“We live in tents in the Mawasi area of Rafah. Our number exceeds 20 people,” he told CNN. Food and drink is hard to come by, “and if they are available, they are at very expensive prices,” he said.

“As for medical supplies, they are completely non-existent,” he added.

The UN’s humanitarian office has issued regular warnings about the situation on the ground, calling the city a “pressure cooker” last week.

“In recent days, thousands of Palestinians have continued to flee to the south, which is already hosting over half the Gaza’s population of some 2.3 million people. Most are living in makeshift structures, tents or out in the open,” a spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Jens Laerke, told a media briefing.

“Rafah is a pressure cooker of despair, and we fear for what comes next,”

The US is allowing Israel to make its own calls on timing and strategy in its war with Hamas, but [US President Joe Biden](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) did weigh in on the matter during his visit with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the war cabinet in Tel Aviv earlier this week, according to a senior administration official.

“He asked some hard questions” about what was being planned and what the effects would be, the official told CNN, adding: “We’re not directing the Israelis, the timeline is theirs – their thinking, their planning.”

The White House late Friday sought to clarify a brief comment made by Biden after he was asked by a reporter whether Israel should delay a ground invasion in Gaza until more hostages can get out. As he climbed the stairs to Air Force One, the president responded, “Yes.”

The White House immediately moved to explain the president’s comments – which could be seen as the US staking out a role in the war between Israel and Hamas that erupted on October 7.

“The president was far away. He didn’t hear the full question. The question sounded like ‘Would you like to see more hostages released?’ He wasn’t commenting on anything else,” White House communications director Ben LaBolt said less than an hour after the president’s comment, according to the press pool.

Earlier Friday, Hamas [released two American hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/hamas-us-hostages-released-intl/index.html#:~:text=American%20hostages%20Judith%20Tai%20Raanan,Friday%2C%20October%2020%2C%202023.) in a deal brokered by the Qatari government. A number of foreign nationals were among those kidnapped by Hamas, but information about the status, location and identity of all the hostages remains scarce.

As [CNN has reported](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/politics/us-allies-israel-discussions-gaza-ground-invasion/index.html), the US and its allies have been urging Israel to be strategic and clear about its goals if and when it launches a ground invasion of Gaza, warning against a prolonged occupation and placing a particular emphasis on avoiding civilian casualties, according to US and Western officials.

During the October 7 attack, Hamas militants killed more than 1,400 people, including civilians and soldiers, according to Israeli authorities. It was the most deadly attack by militants in Israel’s 75-year history and revealed a staggering intelligence failure by the country’s security forces.

Israel has since responded by enacting a blockade on Gaza and launching a barrage of airstrikes into the Palestinian enclave, sparking a humanitarian crisis. Israeli airstrikes in Gaza have killed more than 4,100 people, according to the Palestinian health ministry.

Biden suggested earlier Friday that Hamas’ attack on Israel was in part to derail US-backed efforts to normalize Israel-Saudi relations.

“One of the reasons Hamas moved on Israel … they knew that I was about to sit down with the Saudis,” Biden told supporters at a campaign fundraiser in Washington, according to a pool report.

“Guess what? The Saudis wanted to recognize Israel,” Biden said at the event, which was hosted at the home of a Democratic National Committee official in Washington. The president added that the Saudis were “about to recognize Israel.”

The president has maintained in recent weeks that the effort to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia “is still alive” and remains crucial amid the ongoing conflict, though he has said “it’s going to take time to get done.”

“The Saudis, and the Emiratis and other Arab nations understand that their security and stability is enhanced if there’s normalization of relations with Israel,” Biden [told CBS News](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-saudi-arabia-israel-normalization-not-dead-60-minutes/) in an interview that aired Sunday, adding that “the direction of moving into the normalization makes sense for the Arab nations as well as Israel.”

The [war between Israel and Hamas](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-20-23/index.html) has raised concerns that it could [widen into a regional conflict](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/16/politics/us-prevent-wider-middle-east-war/index.html) that could snowball into an even greater geopolitical crisis. With US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s trips to multiple Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, and Biden’s [visit to Israel this week](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/politics/middle-east-conflict-biden-israel/index.html), the administration has attempted to make clear that they remain hopeful and committed to a normalization deal.

A senior US official told CNN last month that Biden and Netanyahu discussed normalization efforts “in some depth” during a September meeting. Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman expressed optimism that they were close to reaching a deal with Netanyahu [telling CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/22/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-cnn-interview-intl/index.html) last month that the agreement would “change the Middle East forever” and would be a “quantum leap” in the region.

However, when repeatedly asked by CNN’s Kaitlan Collins at the time what kind of concessions he would make to get the deal across the line, Netanyahu refused to answer. MBS had previously said a deal to recognize Israel would have to “ease the life of the Palestinians” though he stopped short of calling for an independent Palestinian state to be established, which has been the kingdom’s official position for decades

The US and its allies have been urging Israel to be strategic and clear about its goals if and when it [launches a ground invasion of Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/10/middleeast/israel-incursion-gaza-analysis-wedeman-intl/index.html), warning against a prolonged occupation and placing a particular emphasis on avoiding civilian casualties, US and Western officials told CNN.

In private discussions with their Israeli counterparts, Western defense officials have not tried to dissuade Israel from moving into Gaza with ground forces, the sources said. But they have emphasized that Israel should have clear objectives when it comes to degrading Hamas and seeking to avoid a long-term occupation of the Gaza Strip.

“Our advice to them isn’t ‘Don’t do it,’ because we completely respect their right to go after Hamas and that means going after them wherever they are,” a NATO defense minister told CNN. “So it’s not ‘Don’t do it,’ but it is ‘Think about what happens and have a strategy, not just a tactical maneuver.’ We expect Israel to act within international humanitarian law, but we understand that they’re dealing with an enemy here.”

President Joe Biden [expressed a similar sentiment](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/15/politics/biden-60-minutes-interview-gaza-israel/index.html) in an interview with “60 Minutes” last week. While he said that “taking out the extremists is a necessary requirement” for Israel, “Hamas and the extreme elements of Hamas don’t represent all the Palestinian people. And I think that it would be a mistake for Israel to occupy Gaza again.”

 “requires clarity about the objectives and an honest assessment about whether the path you’re on will achieve those objectives.”

An Israeli official confirmed that these discussions with the US and other allies are taking place. A separate senior Israeli official said Friday that “Israel is well aware of the humanitarian issues and is taking steps to address it in cooperation with the US government. It’s Hamas who has turned the 2 million people of Gaza into a human shield.”

Earlier this week, Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, told CNN that Israel has “no interest” in occupying Gaza, although Israeli officials have warned the operation there will be lengthy.

Hamas is also believed to be holding over 200 hostages, who could be endangered if Israel invades. The group [released two American hostages](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/hamas-us-hostages-released-intl/index.html), a mother and her daughter, on Friday.

US officials don’t yet have a clear sense for Israel’s intentions in Gaza and believe it will be difficult for Hamas to be eradicated entirely.

At least publicly, Israeli officials have articulated their plans only in broad strokes, saying that the goal is to eliminate Hamas and its infrastructure.

“Our responsibility now is to enter Gaza, go to the places where Hamas organizes, operates, plans and launches,” Israel Defense Forces Chief of the General Staff Herzi Halevi said Sunday, according to Israeli newspaper Haaretz. “To hit them severely everywhere, every commander, every operative, and to destroy infrastructure. In one word – to win.”

In 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu set out to debilitate Hamas with the last ground invasion into Gaza. While that war dealt Hamas a significant blow, it was a huge challenge, and Israel hasn’t attempted another incursion since.

**Concerns about further inflaming tensions**

There is also a rising concern that a ground invasion could further inflame tensions in the region, officials explained, which heightened after a [hospital blast in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/politics/us-intelligence-assessment-gaza-hospital-blast/index.html) that Israel and Hamas have blamed on each other. The US has assessed that Israel was not responsible but has yet to conclusively identify a culprit.

[Protests have erupted](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/middleeast/gaza-hospital-blast-middle-east-protests-intl-hnk/index.html) across the Arab world in the wake of the hospital explosion, and a large-scale and seemingly indiscriminate Israeli ground incursion into Gaza could fuel further unrest, US and Middle Eastern officials told CNN.

US troops [have already been attacked](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/politics/us-shoots-down-drones-iraq/index.html) multiple times in recent days in Iraq and Syria, with drones and rockets targeting coalition bases there. And Hezbollah – the Iranian-backed militant group in Lebanon – has threatened further action if Israeli boots step into Gaza.

“I think we all understand the importance of the information warfare spare,” said one source familiar with US intelligence. “Whatever they do, it needs to be thoughtful and deliberate.”

US officials also fear that a particularly bloody assault on Gaza could risk drawing Hezbollah, to the north, or even Iran into the conflict. Right now, multiple officials familiar with US and Western intelligence say, it appears that neither Tehran nor Hezbollah are particularly keen to intervene directly. But if there is a parade of images of Palestinians suffering under an Israeli assault, their domestic politics could shift.

A senior US official told CNN that among the benefits of Biden’s trip to Israel this week was that it “buys us some time” when it comes to a potential Israeli ground incursion. It was generally understood before the trip that Israel would not escalate in Gaza while Biden was visiting, the official said.

The official added that the longer the Israelis hold off on this kind of military operation the better, because it allows Israel to plan more strategically and not respond as emotionally to the horrors of October 7.

Jonathan Panikoff, a former senior intelligence analyst specializing in the region, told CNN that “the good news is they (Israel forces) have taken the time. They didn’t go immediately and launch a ground operation the next day. I think the president deserves some credit for buying time.”

But Panikoff added that any kind of ground operation won’t be quick or easy, because urban warfare in such a densely populated area is a unique challenge – especially in a place where Hamas is embedded with the civilian population.

“I don’t think that necessarily the goal (of Biden’s trip) was to prevent a full-scale invasion,” he said. “I think the goal was to show clear support (and) to understand Israel’s strategy of what comes after an invasion if Israel is successful in decimating Hamas. What’s the plan for governance in the Gaza Strip?”

Two of those sites, including the arid training site shown in the December video, were a little more than a mile from the most fortified and patrolled section of the Gaza-Israel border. Of the remaining sites: one is located in central Gaza, and the other three in far south Gaza.

Two years of satellite imagery, also reviewed by CNN, show no indication of an offensive Israeli military action against any of the six identified sites.

Not only was there activity in the last several months at the camps, but some camps also absorbed surrounding farmland, converting it from agriculture to barren area for training in the last two years, according to satellite imagery.

In the stunned aftermath of Hamas’ ruthless incursion – where militants abducted 150 people, overran Israeli military bases, and laid waste to [towns and farms](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-fighting-monday-intl-hnk/index.html) – questions are being raised about the intelligence and operational failures by Israel’s security apparatus.

The fact that Hamas trained for the attack in plain sight for at least two years raise further questions as to why Israel, home to the Middle East’s most sophisticated military and spying operation, was unable to pick up on and stop the October 7 attack?

When CNN reached out to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) for comment, its international spokesperson Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus said the findings were “nothing new.”

He added that Hamas has “had many training areas” and Israel’s military had “struck many training areas over the years in the different rounds of escalation.”

Conricus noted that Israel has not had a major escalation with Hamas in over two years, in reference to when hostilities between Israel and Hamas erupted in 2021. It followed weeks of tension in Jerusalem, [where a group](https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/20/middleeast/israel-palestinian-gaza-conflict-ceasefire-intl/index.html) of Palestinian families faced eviction from their homes in East Jerusalem in favor of Jewish nationalists.

Conricus also said that Hamas may have made the facilities “look civilian.”

However, five of the sites – the sixth is a landing strip – do not have civilian features and are nearly identical in how they are constructed and arranged.

They are all surrounded by massive earthen berms, which are taller than the buildings in the camps. The buildings – most have no roofs – are nearly all made from cinderblocks and cement.

Some camps have gates and fences, while others have street curbs but no paved roads.

Asked about the camps, Conricus said they could not answer CNN’s questions “since they relate to the complex analysis of intelligence at the same time that we are fighting a war.”

“This topic, together with numerous other issues, will be investigated by the IDF at the end of the war,” he added.

**In plain sight**

Senior Hamas official Ali Baraka, the head of the Lebanon-based Hamas National Relations Abroad, told RT Arabic following Saturday’s attack that the terror organization has been preparing for the attack for two years.

Metadata analyzed by CNN indicates that Hamas conducted the trainings for months, sometimes over a year, before releasing the propaganda montages on their social media channels

In one clip, militants are seen practicing take-offs, landings and assaults with paragliders. The metadata showed it was filmed over a year ago. The shadows and position of the sun in the video also indicates that filmed training sessions either lasted for hours, or took place on multiple days.

During the October 7 attack, paragliders took off at dawn close to two training camps geolocated by CNN that are near the Gaza-Israel border.

The videos show that the same practice take-off location the paragliders used had also been used to test Hamas’ own homegrown drones. Metadata indicates those tests took place months before the paragliding montages took place.

Hamas terrorists are also seen in propaganda videos practicing with the type of weaponry they would use to attack on October 7. They created mock Israeli buildings and streets and are seen executing a number of different assault tactics on them.

At a training site hundreds of feet from the Erez Crossing, a wall of a building has a drawing of two palm trees and an animal figure that looks similar to Israel’s Erez Crossing battalion’s insignia.

The video shows them even practicing taking prisoners and zip-tying their hands at the camp.

Satellite imagery shows that the camp was constructed within the last year and a half.

In three of the training camps, they even created fake Israeli tanks consisting of what appears to be a large outer shell surrounding a truck. Fighters are seen practicing an attack against it, launching RPGs and other explosives

Police Superintendent Dudi Katz said officers have collected more than 1,000 statements and more than 60,000 video clips related to the attacks that include accounts from people who reported seeing women raped. He added that investigators do not have firsthand testimony, and it is not clear whether any rape victims survived.

About 1,200 Israelis were killed and more injured that day in villages and farms near Gaza when Hamas militants struck across the border in coordinated attacks, taking more than 240 hostages and precipitating the current war. More than 11,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to authorities in Hamas-controlled Gaza.

Police Commissioner Yaakov Shabtai said the investigation could potentially lead to prosecutions, but for now, documentation is the primary mission.

Ad Feedback

Cochav Elkayam-Levy, a human rights law expert at Hebrew University, has formed a civil commission with colleagues to document evidence of the atrocities, fearing that as the war devastates Gaza and the lives of thousands of Palestinians, the world seems willing to look over the violence against Israeli women and girls. “We’ll never know everything that has happened to them,” Elkayam-Levy told CNN. “We know that most women who were raped and who were sexually assaulted were also murdered.”

She pointed to a United Nations statement just a week after the terror attacks that did not mention sexual violence.

“It’s much worse than just silence or an insult to us as Israeli women and to our children and to our people,” she said of the UN. “When they are failing to acknowledge us, to acknowledge what happened here, they are failing humanity.”

**Harrowing reports**

Accounts given to CNN detail horrific, almost inhuman, crimes.

A paramedic from the Israel Defense Forces’ elite 669 Special Tactics Rescue Unit said he had encountered all kinds of casualties before, but the violence from October 7 was unimaginable.

In one kibbutz, he went house to house looking for anyone still alive after the carnage and found the bodies of two young teenage girls in a bedroom.

“One is lying on the bed. One on the floor,” he told CNN.

The combat paramedic, who did not want his name published, said the girl on the floor was on her stomach. He had no doubt the teenager was raped, but he did not know if she died first.

“Her pants are pulled down toward her knees and there’s a bullet wound on the back side of her neck near her head,” he recounted.“There’s a puddle of blood around her head and there’s remains of semen on the lower part of her back.”

The girl on the bed had bruises all over her body and a bullet wound to the chest, he said.

“These are two girls that were just killed, executed, perhaps raped in their own bedroom,” he told CNN.

In response to subsequent reports raising questions about the account – specifically about the location, which he identified as Kibbutz Be’eri – the paramedic referred questions to the IDF. A spokesman pointed to a report from the United Nations that found grounds to believe accounts of rape and gang rape in the October 7 attacks, and added: “In the case in question, the combat paramedic shared his personal experience when he arrived at the scene of the massacre. Considering the privacy of the victims and their families, it is not possible to provide more information about the case.”

In a statement to CNN, the kibbutz said: “We have no other information. It is important to note that we do not dispute that sexual violence has been part of Hamas’ plan and been conducted in other places according to testimonies, just not on said girls, who have been brutally murdered nonetheless.”

Others reported similar horrors at [the Nova music festival](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/10/middleeast/hamas-music-festival-attack-investigation-cmd-intl/) where hundreds of young people were killed by terrorists.

Rami Shmuel, an organizer of the festival, said he saw female victims with no clothes as he made his escape, and has no doubts about what happened.

“Their legs were spread out and some of them were butchered,” he told CNN.

He added that it appeared women were specifically targeted for sexual violence.

“Why didn’t they [take] clothes off men?” he asked. “Only women, only young girls, beautiful girls, why?”

**A long investigation ahead**

Israel’s police acknowledge their investigation may take months, and Elkayam-Levy said it remains unclear how or where any prosecutions would be handled, though she noted that some families of dual nationals could seek justice in countries other than Israel as well as pursue cases in international courts.

But officials provided a stark window into the evidence they have been gathering at a press briefing, which included a statement from a woman who witnessed the Nova festival attack from her hiding place on October 7.

“They bent someone over and I understood he was raping her, and then he was passing her on to someone else,” the woman, who was not identified, said of what she saw.

“She was alive, she stood on her feet and she was bleeding from her back. I saw that he was pulling her hair. She had long brown hair. I saw him chop off her breast and then he was throwing it toward the road, tossed it to someone else and they started playing with it.”

The witness added: “I remember seeing another person raping her, and while he was still inside her he shot her in the head.”

Lengthy inspections, rejected humanitarian aid and Israeli bombs raining down. Those are some of the hurdles to relief reaching the 2.2 million Palestinians in war-torn Gaza.

The United Nations’ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, Martin Griffiths, has described the process as “[in all practical terms, impossible.](https://twitter.com/NewsHour/status/1749939833449939301)”

Gaza was placed under a complete Israeli siege on October 9, when Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said he would halt the supply of electricity, food, water and fuel to the enclave after Hamas attacked his country, killing 1,200 people and taking more than 250 hostages. Israel has since begun allowing some aid to enter.

Some four months since Israel began its retaliatory military campaign in Gaza, it is yet to complete its objective of destroying Hamas and the war rages on, leaving most of Gaza’s civilian population at the mercy of aid that must be approved by Israel.

While aid reaching the Gaza Strip was [insufficient even before](https://www.unicef.org/mena/documents/gaza-strip-humanitarian-impact-15-years-blockade-june-2022) October 7, according to the UN, the humanitarian situation has been greatly hit by the conflict, which has killed more than 27,000 people, according to the Hamas-run health ministry in the enclave, and displaced more than 1.9 million others.

Ad Feedback

Getting any form of relief into Gaza is a long and arduous process, aid workers and the UN say.

An average of 95 aid trucks per day entered Gaza between October 10 and February 1, [according to the Palestinian Red Crescent,](https://twitter.com/PalestineRCS/status/1754239103996969299?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1754239103996969299%7Ctwgr%5Ebda3a338cb5389ee55a3df4f94ecac4818889a36%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.palestinechronicle.com%2Fthis-is-the-number-of-aid-trucks-that-enter-devastated-gaza-on-a-daily-basis-prcs%2F) down from 500 commercial and aid trucks a day before the war, when Palestinians weren’t facing mass displacement and starvation. Some 2 million Gazans [are dependent on UN](https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/gaza-strip-humanitarian-crisis-deepens-time-funding-suspensions-put-unrwa-aid#:~:text=Across%20the%20Gaza%20Strip%2C%20nearly,assistance%20and%20primary%20health%20care.) aid now.

“The humanitarian operation and the delivery of trucks continues to be cumbersome and continues to be unnecessarily complex,” Juliette Touma, director of communications for the UN’s agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA), told CNN.

Relief operations are expected to be further hampered after the United States and other top donors [suspend funding for UNRWA](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/middleeast/unrwa-funding-israel-war-mime-intl/index.html), the main agency responsible for aid distribution in Gaza. The donors pulled their funding over allegations by Israel that some of its staff were involved in the Hamas attacks.

UNRWA has warned it may be forced to halt its operations by the end of the month due to lack of funds. And on Thursday, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini [said the agency has not been able](https://twitter.com/UNLazzarini/status/1755586807876485227) to deliver food into Gaza since January 23, adding that since the beginning of the year, “half of UN’s aid mission requests to the north were denied.”

“The UN has identified deep pockets of starvation and hunger in northern Gaza where people are believed to be on the verge of famine,” Lazzarini said on X.

Following a CNN request for comment, Israel’s Coordinator of the Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) said Israel operates in accordance with international law and “is neither preventing nor blocking the entry of humanitarian aid but rather facilitates the transfer of aid by the international aid organizations in accordance with operational conditions in the field.”

Israel has also been accused of deliberately obstructing aid. Egypt, which shares a border with Gaza, has charged that the policy is “systematic, and aimed at pushing Palestinians to leave Gaza under the continued bombing and siege,” an [Egyptian foreign ministry spokesperson said in November.](https://twitter.com/MfaEgypt/status/1726476479171903747)

[Israel maintains](https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/hamas-israel-war-24/all-articles/israel-s-humanitarian-aid-efforts-for-gazan-civilians/) that it is working to respond to the needs on the ground in Gaza, saying that “it is at war with Hamas and not the people of Gaza.” Last month, it [told the International Court of Justice](https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240112-ora-01-00-bi.pdf) that “there is no limit on the amount of food, water, shelter or medical supplies that can be brought into Gaza.”

Here’s why aid is slow to get into Gaza:

**Limited entry points**

Before the war started, Israel restricted all access to and from Gaza by sea and air and had land crossings under tight control. It had [two functional crossings with the enclave](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/rafah-crossing-gaza-egypt-explainer-intl/index.html): Erez, which was for the movement of people, and Kerem Shalom, for goods.

Gaza also has one crossing with Egypt, at Rafah, which is run by Egyptian authorities. While Israel has no direct control over this crossing, it monitors all activity in southern Gaza. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry [previously told CNN](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-17-23/h_234761c28d0e0101c06183ef7c55f606) that the Rafah crossing has been repeatedly bombed, causing disruptions in aid.

Movement through all three crossings was already heavily restricted before the war, as Israel imposed a blockade of the territory with Egypt 17 years ago. After the current war began, Erez and Kerem Shalom were shut for several weeks. On October 21, Rafah began allowing aid to trickle in.

In mid-December, Israel [began conducting security checks](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-12-23/h_733703d8c8d0b2396dfafac6c8ae54ef) on aid for Gaza at its own crossings before it was sent to Rafah. It said at the time that the move would double the volume of aid delivered through Rafah, but aid workers have said the additional inspection points were insufficient, [according to the UN](https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-67-enhe). Egypt criticized the measures as unreasonable, saying it [hinders the flow of aid](https://twitter.com/MfaEgypt/status/1718285955394687118). Following pressure from the US, Israel began [allowing aid trucks to pass through Kerem Shalom](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-17-23/h_1570c325b37b167610fc7d6ccb26adfc) in late December.

Aid delivery through Egypt is also hampered by the fact that the Rafah crossing is [designed as an entry point for people,](https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-60-enarhe) not goods, making it difficult for large convoys to pass through.

**Long inspections, rejected items**

The war has prompted Israel to conduct more stringent checks on aid as it seeks to prevent the entry of what it calls “[dual-use equipment](https://twitter.com/cogatonline/status/1752975874717036813),” products it says are “intended for civilian use but liable to serve military needs for the strengthening of Hamas.”

Trucks carrying aid must pass through three layers of inspection before they can enter the enclave, Griffiths, the UN under-secretary-general, has said.

The long queues for inspection have led to bottlenecks at the Rafah crossing, the [UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) said last month](https://www.wfp.org/stories/hungers-border-why-aid-trucks-taking-humanitarian-gear-and-food-gaza-face-long-waits), adding that among items deemed “dual use” by Israel are power generators, crutches, field hospital kits, inflatable water tanks, wooden boxes of children’s toys and, “perhaps most depressingly, 600 oxygen tanks.”

The list of rejected items is only growing, [Griffiths said](https://twitter.com/UNReliefChief/status/1740526522476191938).

**Protesters blocking trucks**

Israeli protesters have more than once blocked trucks carrying humanitarian aid for Gaza via Israeli crossings. They have demanded that the aid only be delivered in exchange for the release of the hostages. The protesters are with the “Tsav 9’” movement, a grouping of families of hostages, fallen soldiers, demobilized reservists, and displaced Israeli civilians.

Israel says more than 100 hostages are still held captive in Gaza.

Some of the protests have caused aid disruptions lasting days, [UNRWA said](https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-72-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-Jerusalem).

Following the protests, Israel declared Kerem Shalom and the Nitzana crossing with Egypt military zones, a move that led [to some arrests](https://www.timesofisrael.com/30-protesters-detained-amid-clashes-at-kerem-shalom-over-aid-to-gaza/#:~:text=Dozens%20of%20people%20attempting%20to,Crossing%20to%20Gaza%2C%20on%20Wednesday.), according to Israeli media.

Disruptions were renewed this week as hundreds of Israeli protesters returned to Kerem Shalom Tuesday.

**Risk of bombardment**

Once relief enters Gaza, Israeli bombardment, damage to roads from airstrikes, communications blackouts and mass displacement impede distribution within the enclave.

“It becomes very difficult to make phone calls to coordinate, to organize the delivery of humanitarian assistance,” Touma, the UNRWA spokesperson, said. [In the wake of the war,](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-12-4-2023/h_1f2eba8ae4105c7b48bff787a0fc4369) Israel cut electricity to Gaza and service providers said airstrikes destroyed vital communications network infrastructure. The territory has since experienced multiple communication blackouts, leaving Palestinians unable to contact each other or the outside world.

Humanitarian workers cannot move safely across the strip. UN trucks carrying aid [have repeatedly](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-29-23/h_0db62fd12b910a8dfe93fc302ac19d5d) come under Israeli fire, according to UNRWA. On February 5, an UNRWA truck waiting to take aid into northern Gaza [was hit](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-05-24/h_cb28c9762353d6b31a6dc2a6be971b11) by Israeli naval gunfire, the agency said, adding that no one was injured. The IDF told CNN that it is looking into the incident.

“It is extremely difficult to deliver humanitarian assistance under fire,” Touma said on Monday. “We fear for (workers’) lives because no place is safe in Gaza.”

In recent days, Israel has pressed its military offensive further into central, southern and in neighborhoods across [northern Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-30-24/h_d4d4fca2f6e4452137893310c0035b04) – where UN agencies have struggled to reach displaced civilians facing starvation, dehydration and deadly disease.

On Friday, the [World Food Programme said it](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/02/1146192) had been unable to reach northern Gaza City for the third time in a week, as a  [full-scale famine](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/middleeast/famine-looms-in-gaza-israel-war-intl/index.html) looms. Touma says Israeli authorities must approve humanitarian convoys waiting to enter the north at the [Wadi Gaza checkpoint](https://www.who.int/news/item/12-12-2023-who-calls-for-protection-of-humanitarian-space-in-gaza-following-serious-incidents-in-high-risk-mission-to-transfer-patients--deliver-health-supplies) that separates the north and south of the strip. Beyond that, she said, there are around 300,000 people “living in desperate conditions.”

When aid does enter the shelters housing displaced Palestinians, Touma told CNN, aid workers are sometimes unable to regulate distribution due to overcrowding.

“Then you have overwhelming needs on the ground that are way, way beyond the capacity of humanitarian agencies because not much aid is coming in,” Touma said, adding that Gazans are “absolutely tired, fatigued, desperate and so quite often what happens is that people come to the humanitarian convoys, and they help themselves to the convoys.”

The suspension of funding by a growing number of Western countries for a United Nations agency for Palestinians has raised questions about the fate of the 5.9 million refugees it serves.

The United States and at least 13 of its allies have [pulled funding](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-29-24/h_58fb8198b7bb03e1bdd36799f885e491) for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), following allegations by Israel that some of its staff were involved in Hamas’ October 7 attack, which killed 1,200 and saw more than 250 others taken hostage.

Israel subsequently launched a war on the militant group that killed more than 26,000 people in Gaza, according to the Hamas-controlled health ministry there, and displaced the vast majority of the enclave’s 2.3 million inhabitants, who are in need of humanitarian aid.

While details remain scant, Israel alleges that 13 of UNRWA’s 13,000 Gaza staffers were associated with Hamas’ October 7 attack and took part in varying capacities, ranging from involvement in kidnapping hostages to being told to set up an operations room, according to a [summary of the intelligence](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/middleeast/israel-allegations-unwra-october-7-intl/index.html) shared with CNN by an Israeli official. The summary does not provide evidence to support its claims.

[UNRWA fired several employees](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/26/middleeast/unrwa-fires-staff-members-october-7-attacks-intl/index.html) after the allegations and launched an investigation, promising that anyone involved in the October 7 attacks will be held accountable “including through criminal prosecution” if found to be responsible.

But beyond the allegations of recent days, Israel has longstanding issues with UNRWA, accusing it of aiding Hamas and calling for it to be entirely dismantled.

**What does UNRWA do?**

UNRWA was founded by the United Nations a year after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which marked the creation of Israel and the displacement of [more than 700,000](https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136662) Palestinians from their homes in an event known by Palestinians as the Nakba (catastrophe).

The agency provides a wide range of aid and services to Palestinian refugees and their descendants. It is a major source of employment for the refugees, who make up most of its more than [30,000 employees across the Middle East,](https://www.unrwa.org/careers/working-unrwa) and has representative offices in New York, Geneva and Brussels. [Over 13,000 of its employees](https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip) are stationed in the Gaza Strip.

[UNRWA is unique](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/icg_report_on_unrwa.pdf) in that it is the only UN agency dedicated to a specific group of refugees in specific areas. While its purpose is to support Palestinian refugees, UNRWA does not have a mandate to resettle them, a mandate that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does have. The UNHCR does not, however, have a mandate over Palestine refugees within UNRWA’s areas of operation.

Last year, the agency had a budget of [$1.6 billion](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/finance_and_ercd_update_to_adcom_-_21_nov_23.pdf), most of which is earmarked for [education and healthcare](https://www.unrwa.org/how-you-can-help/how-we-spend-funds), followed by other services such as infrastructure and refugee camp improvement.

Since the Gaza war, UNRWA has [issued a flash appeal for $481 million](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/finance_and_ercd_update_to_subcom_-_8_nov_23_1.pdf) in additional funding for critical humanitarian needs.

**What is likely to happen if UNRWA’s operations stop?**

UNRWA is the primary humanitarian aid group in Gaza. [Some 2 million Gazans rely](https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa%E2%80%99s-lifesaving-aid-may-end-due-funding-suspension) on the agency for aid, with 1 million people using UNRWA shelters for food and healthcare amid the fighting in the enclave.

The agency has provided Gazans with everything from food and healthcare to education and psychological support for decades.

Along with the Palestinian Red Crescent, [UNRWA handles almost all distribution](https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2023/11/87482/explainer-how-aid-reaches-gaza) of UN aid coming into the territory. The agency has 11 food distribution centers for 1 million people in Gaza.

[The UN has warned](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1145987) that current funding is insufficient and that UNRWA may run out of funds by February.

Leo Cans, head of mission Palestine for Médecins Sans Frontières, also known as Doctors Without Borders, told CNN Sunday that the situation could deteriorate, as the aid coming in to Gaza is already insufficient.

“(If) you stop these trucks, people will die of hunger and very quickly,”

The repercussions of UNRWA halting its operations could however be felt far beyond Gaza. Millions more Palestinian refugees live in neighboring countries like Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and rely on aid from the agency.

For Palestinians on the ground in Gaza, prospects of life without UNRWA look grim. At one UNRWA school shelter in Deir al Balah, Gazans said they were worried about the suffering to come if UNRWA’s aid is suspended.

“UNRWA is the one who helps the refugees and the displaced,” Um Mohammad Al Khabbaz, a Palestinian woman at the shelter, told CNN on Monday. “What’s left for the people if they stop the aid?”

Alaa Khdeir, a university professor, called the move “an oppressive decision towards the Palestinian people.”

“This will mean more starvation, poverty, and deprivation, which ultimately means death,” added Khdeir. “This is not just an issue; this is a crime. It wipes out the people.”

UN Secretary-General António [Guterres on Sunday appealed](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-01-28/statement-the-secretary-general-unrwa?_gl=1*1miobjv*_ga*MzQyMDE5MDUwLjE3MDUwNTMxNzk.*_ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTcwNjUyODY2NS44LjAuMTcwNjUyODY2NS4wLjAuMA..*_ga_S5EKZKSB78*MTcwNjUyODY2NS43LjEuMTcwNjUyODY4Mi40My4wLjA.) to the countries that suspended funding to UNRWA, urging them to reconsider their decisions.

“I strongly appeal to the governments that have suspended their contributions to, at least, guarantee the continuity of UNRWA’s operations,” he said. “The dire needs of the desperate populations they (UNRWA staff) serve must be met.”

It is unclear which organizations could replace UNRWA should the agency be forced to halt its operations. Yuval Shany, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s faculty of law, said that even if UNRWA is forced out of Gaza, Israel likely wants a phased-out exit to avoid a worsened humanitarian shock on the ground.

“The reason why Israel for all the years, despite its many criticisms (of UNRWA) didn’t push hard for dismantling UNRWA, and in fact even cooperated with UNRWA on many occasions, is because UNRWA does provide essential humanitarian services,” Shany told CNN, adding that with the current situation in Gaza, it may not be realistic to fully pull UNRWA out of the territory.

**Why does Israel oppose UNRWA?**

Israeli leaders have campaigned against UNRWA long before October 7, criticizing the organization’s role in Gaza and elsewhere as well as its definition of which Palestinians are eligible for refugee status. More recently, officials have sought to delegitimize the agency and have proposed dismantling it altogether.

In 2018, [the US](https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/31/politics/trump-administration-ending-funding-palestinian-refugees/index.html), under the administration of President Donald Trump, ended all funding for the agency at Israel’s behest, with the State Department at the time describing the body as “irredeemably flawed.” When Joe Biden became president in 2021, [he reversed his predecessor’s decision](https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/08/middleeast/us-palestinians-funds-intl/index.html) and restored UNRWA’s funding.

The US has long been the [biggest single donor](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/top_20_donors_2022_overall_ranking.pdf) to UNRWA.

In 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to dissolve UNRWA and merge it with the main UN refugee agency, the UNHCR.

More recently, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz has suggested that Israel will seek to stop the UN agency from operating in post-war Gaza, saying it “will not be a part of the day after.”

“We have been warning for years,” Katz said. “UNRWA perpetuates the refugee issue, obstructs peace, and serves as a civilian arm of Hamas in Gaza.”

UNRWA has repeatedly [denied Israeli allegations](https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/remarks%E2%80%AF-unrwa-commissioner-general-philippe-lazzarini%E2%80%AF-occupied) that its aid is being diverted to Hamas, and that it teaches hatred in its schools, and has questioned “the motivation of those who make such claims, through large advocacy campaigns.” It has condemned the October 7 attack as “abhorrent.”

The threat to remove UNRWA from the besieged Gaza Strip has caused UN officials and those who rely on the agency to sound the alarm.

“Israel doesn’t see UNRWA as something which is conducive to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” said Shany of the Hebrew University.

Israel instead views the agency as “a mechanism that perpetuates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” he told CNN, “And specifically perpetuates the conflict with regards to the right to return, by designating refugees and their descendants from 1948… as refugees.”

The right of return refers to the right of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to their ancestral homes in what is now Israel, which was recognized by the 1948 [UN General Assembly Resolution 194](https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194). The fate of refugees is one of the most contentious issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel also sees UNRWA as biased against it, Shany said, adding that it is “regarded by Israel as one of the more hostile UN agencies against it in international arenas.”

The agency [defines Palestinian refugees](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/08/middleeast/israel-un-diplomatic-showdown-hamas-war-mime-intl/index.html) as those who were dispossessed from their homes during Israel’s creation in 1948, as well as their descendants. That amounts to 5.9 million people today. Israel opposes their return, arguing that such a large influx of Palestinians would nullify its Jewish character.

UNRWA perpetuates “the narrative of the so-called right of return, whose goal is the elimination of Israel. For these reasons, UNRWA should be [shut down](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-back-us-cuts-to-unrwa-but-says-they-should-be-gradual/),” Netanyahu said in 2018.

Of Gaza’s more than 2 million people, 1.6 million are refugees, according to UNRWA.

“According to Israel, this (UNRWA) perpetuates a narrative that the people who live in Gaza would someday go back to Israel, and this motivates them to resist,”

Just weeks before Hamas launched its October 7 attack on Israel, Saudi Arabia said it was [inching closer](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/21/middleeast/saudi-arabia-mbs-interview-fox-intl/index.html) to normalizing diplomatic ties with the Jewish state. Despite three months of war that have left more than 23,000 Palestinians dead and the Arab world seething, Riyadh is signaling that a recognition of Israel could still be on the table.

On another tour of shuttle diplomacy across the Middle East, including to Saudi Arabia and Israel, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [last week said](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-20/) that normalization talks continue to take place and “there is a clear interest in the region in pursuing that.

“With regard to integration, to normalization, yes, we talked about that actually on every stop, including of course here in Saudi Arabia,” [Blinken told reporters](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-20/) in Saudi Arabia before heading to Israel.  “And I can tell you this: There’s a clear interest here in pursuing that,” he said. “This interest is there, it’s real, and it could be transformative.”

In an [interview with the BBC](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0h3wzxp) on Tuesday, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United Kingdom said “absolutely there’s interest” in normalizing relations. “There’s been interest since 1982,” Prince Khalid bin Bandar said.

But experts say the price that Saudi Arabia would demand in exchange for normalization would be higher now than before the Gaza war, as Riyadh may feel compelled to extract more concessions from the United States and Israel.

CNN has reached out to the Saudi foreign ministry for comment.

“The Saudi government is still open to normalization on condition that Israel takes concrete steps on the ground to create the foundations of a two-state solution,” Ali Shihabi, a Saudi author and analyst, told CNN. “That would be, for example, completely removing the blockade from Gaza, fully empowering the PA (Palestinian Authority) in Gaza and (the) West Bank, withdrawal from key areas in (the) West Bank etc.”

The steps, Shihabi said, must be “concrete and not empty promises that Israel could forget about after normalization like it did with other countries that normalized (with Israel).”

While Blinken did not call for a ceasefire in Gaza, he added that Israel’s further integration into the Middle East would require that “the conflict end in Gaza,” as well as the paving of a “practical pathway” to a Palestinian state.

The Palestinians seek an independent state in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. Most Muslim and Arab countries have refused to recognize Israel until such a state is established.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli officials have repeatedly [shot down the prospect](https://twitter.com/shlomo_karhi/status/1734631075043778670) of a Palestinian state. [Last month US President Joe Biden](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12/politics/biden-israel-losing-support-netanyahu/index.html) said the Israeli government “doesn’t want a two-state solution.”

In 2020, four Arab nations, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, [recognized Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/15/politics/israel-uae-abraham-accords-documents/index.html) under a set of treaties known as the Abraham Accords, sidestepping the longstanding Arab demand for a Palestinian state. Since then, the Biden administration has been working to bring Saudi Arabia, widely regarded as the leader of the Muslim world, to follow suit, a move that could have opened the door to other Muslim countries to recognize Israel.

Seen as one of the architects of the accords, UAE ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba [at the time stressed](https://www.uae-embassy.org/news/statements-and-reactions-regarding-uae-israel-peace-accord) the viability of the two-state solution, indicating that it was not being abandoned for the sake of normalization.

The treaty between the UAE and Israel “immediately stops annexation (of the West Bank) and the potential of violent escalation. It maintains the viability of a two-state solution as endorsed by the Arab League and international community,” Otaiba said.

While the establishment of a Palestinian state has been Riyadh’s official stance for two decades, the demand had been absent from official rhetoric in recent years, before the October 7 attack.

When asked about Saudi Arabia’s requirements for normalization with Israel, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) [in September told Fox News](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/21/middleeast/saudi-arabia-mbs-interview-fox-intl/index.html) he hopes the deal will “reach a place that will ease the life of the Palestinians,” stopping short of calling for a state.

At the time, [official rhetoric was centered](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/02/middleeast/gulf-arab-states-us-security-pact-mime-intl/index.html) on stronger US security guarantees for Saudi Arabia, as well as US help with the kingdom’s [civilian nuclear program.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/10/middleeast/saudi-israel-normalization-conditions-intl/index.html)

The October 7 attack on Israel and the devastating war in Gaza that followed prompted Saudi Arabia to pause normalization talks with an Israeli government despised in an Arab world that sees it as responsible for the suffering of Palestinians.

[A poll conducted](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-poll-sheds-light-saudi-views-israel-hamas-war) by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, from November 14 to December 6, found that 96% of the 1,000 Saudis surveyed said they believed “Arab countries should immediately break all diplomatic, political, economic, and any other contacts with Israel, in protest against its military action in Gaza.”

Since the war, the US has suggested that sidestepping Palestinian rights, in order to integrate Israel in the region, may not be tenable. [Blinken said on Tuesday](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-10-24/h_ac18b2c48eb762b73ca4f2a6094e10b5) that it is clear to him from conversations across the region that a normalization deal is “not in substitute for or at the expense of a political horizon for the Palestinians and ultimately a Palestinian state.”

Normalization talks seem once again to be prioritizing Palestinian rights.

“Given how inflamed Saudi public opinion is in light of the war in Gaza, Riyadh will now need much more meaningful Israeli concessions towards the Palestinians, possibly including the creation of a provisional Palestinian state,” said Firas Maksad, senior fellow and director of outreach at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC.

“While we still, going forward even after October 7, believe in normalization, it does not come at the cost of the Palestinian people,” Prince Khalid, the Saudi ambassador, told the BBC, describing Palestinians as “the key element” in any normalization deal with Israel. “This is not a Saudi-Israeli peace plan, this is a Palestinian-Israeli peace plan.”

Asked whether Hamas would be part of any future Palestinian state, the ambassador did not rule out the prospect, saying it “requires a lot of thought, a lot of work… there is always room for change if you have optimism and hope.”

**Riyadh is not in a hurry**

Saudi Arabia can, however, afford to wait until conditions are right for a deal with Israel, Maksad told CNN.

Saudi-Israel normalization has become one of the main US policy objectives in the Middle East. Biden, who during his presidential campaign promised to turn Saudi Arabia into a “pariah” for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey, put his differences with MBS aside over the past two years as Riyadh signaled its willingness to embrace Israel.

For the Biden administration, brokering a normalization deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia would be a major foreign policy victory ahead of this year’s presidential elections.

Congressional delegations, composed of both Democrats and Republicans, now visit this kingdom frequently, and relations with the Biden administration have rebounded after a bumpy start,” Maksad said, adding that until Saudi Arabia sees the change it wants, it has the luxury of time.

Riyadh is however wary of striking a deal with the current Israeli cabinet, the most right-wing government in Israel’s history, and one seen in the Arab world as responsible for the carnage in Gaza.

Prince Khalid described the current Israeli attitude as one that is “extreme,” “absolutist” and uncompromising.

“The problem is not the occupied land, occupied by settlers. It is that the settlers have now occupied the Israeli government, and by that I mean the extremist settlers, the extremist settler mentality which is absolutist,” Prince Khalid told the BBC, adding that the main obstacle to finding a resolution to the conflict is now Israel.

Already, there are some strains between Israel and the UAE, the main Arab party to the Abraham Accords. The Gulf state, which held the rotating United Nations Security Council presidency twice over the past two years, introduced a draft resolution that was critical of Israel in December. A significantly watered-down [version](http://version/) eventually passed.

Abu Dhabi is pressing for an end to the war and a return to the two-state solution as a pathway for peace. The war in Gaza is “a turning point moment” for the UAE, Lana Nusseibeh, its ambassador to the UN [told The Wall Street Journal](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-a-e-links-support-for-rebuilding-gaza-to-push-for-two-state-solution-b878b433) last month.

Without a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the UAE will not be “as fully invested in the rebuild” of Gaza, she said. “That’s not the trajectory we signed the Abraham Accords on,” she said.

Abu Dhabi has, however, indicated that it doesn’t want the war to jeopardize relations with Israel.

Anwar Gargash, the UAE president’s diplomatic adviser, told a conference in Dubai this month that in recognizing Israel, “the UAE has taken a strategic decision, and strategic decisions are long-term.”

“There is no doubt that any strategic decision will face multiple obstacles, and we’re facing a major obstacle that must be dealt with,” Gargash said, [according to Saudi-owned Al Arabiya.](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2024/01/04/UAE-to-maintain-strategic-decision-on-Israel-ties-amid-Gaza-war-Anwar-Gargash)

Shihabi, the Saudi analyst, said that his country’s government “is not interested in cosmetics,” adding that a normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel is “the only card the US or anybody else has with Israel to encourage them to make concessions.”

“The kingdom is aware of that and wants to try and push for a final settlement of this conflict.”

This remains one of the most important, and dangerous, fault lines in this volatile region. Following the [surprise Hamas attacks](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/hamas-training-site-gaza-israel-intl/index.html) on Israel on October 7, this frontier – largely calm since the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war – is even more charged with consequence.

Any conflict erupting here could pour fuel on the raging fire of the current Hamas-Israel war by drawing in the most powerful paramilitary group in the Middle East: [Iran-backed Hezbollah.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/politics/us-allies-warn-hezbollah/index.html)

Hezbollah’s political stance has unambiguously supported the Palestinian militants. It has sponsored rallies in support of Palestinian groups and has roundly condemned Israel’s large-scale airstrikes on Gaza.

More than 1,200 people have been killed in the [Hamas attacks on Israel](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/israel-gaza-humanitarian-crisis-war-thursday-intl-hnk/index.html), while more than 1,500 people have been killed by Israeli strikes on Gaza since Saturday.

But it is still unclear whether Hezbollah will actively participate in this conflict. So far, it has adhered to its current rules of engagement and repeatedly stated that it will fire at Israel only when Lebanese territory, or its fighters, are fired upon. It has broadly stuck to that, despite the spiraling wider tensions.

Skirmishes here can instead be seen as the low rumble of tit-for-tat exchanges since the start of the Hamas-Israel war. For days, Lebanon-based Palestinian militants have launched rockets into Israel, leading to Israeli attacks on Lebanese territory, including Hezbollah positions. Hezbollah has fired back at Israeli border positions with precision-guided missiles.

Three Hezbollah militants and three Israeli soldiers have been killed in the nearly week-long exchange of fire here.

Hezbollah has not intervened on behalf of the Palestinian militants so far. The group has explicitly linked its attacks on Israel to Israel’s targeting of Lebanese territory, and the fighting remains limited to this border region.

Still, the region remains on a knife’s edge.

Multiple reports have suggested that Western diplomats have sought to keep the Shia armed group out of the emerging conflict. The USS Gerald R Ford, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, is now stationed in the eastern Mediterranean in what is seen by many analysts as a US attempt to deter that eventuality, which could herald a much more violent phase of this war.

Unlike Hamas, Hezbollah is a regional power. For years, it has participated in several conflicts in the Middle East, including in Iraq and Syria. It is also believed to have materially supported and trained Houthi rebels in Yemen. Its fighters are battle-hardened from fighting on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad against Syria’s armed opposition groups, as well as against ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra front. This has given them significant experience in urban warfare.

Hezbollah also has a much more sophisticated arsenal than it had during its 2006 war with Israel, which ended up with no clear victor or vanquished. At the time, many parts of Lebanon were devastated, but Hezbollah foiled Israel’s ultimate plan to dismantle the group, dealing a blow to Israel’s aura of invincibility. Back then, Hezbollah fought mostly with inaccurate, Soviet-era Katyusha rockets. Nowadays, it has precision guided missiles.

In addition to potentially bringing more sophisticated weaponry and fighters into the current conflict, Hezbollah’s intervention could rope in other parties, too. Hezbollah is part of a coalition of Iran-backed fighters who are still stationed in Syria. Their participation could potentially open a third front on the Syria-Israel border, this time alongside Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) who are also present in Syria.

Until the end of the Hamas-Israel conflict, diplomats and observers of many stripes will continue to watch the tinderbox here very closely. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah has gone noticeably quiet since the start of the hostilities to the south, adding to the strange relatively tranquil yet incredibly tense atmosphere.

Thursday’s calm on the Lebanon-Israel border – interrupted occasionally by Israeli interceptions of rockets from Palestinian militants – begs many questions. Has the flare-up here ground to a near halt? Or is this the lull before a huge regional storm?

At Tulane, a fight broke out after someone tried to burn an Israeli flag. At Columbia University, posters of kidnapped Israelis were torn down. At Harvard and Columbia, a so-called “[doxxing truck” showed up on campus](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/business/harvard-doxxing-truck-israel-hamas-statement/index.html) naming students whose organizations co-authored a statement saying Israel is “entirely responsible” for the deadly October 7 attacks by Hamas and “all unfolding violence.” And at Cornell, classes were canceled Friday after death threats were posted toward Jewish students under the username “hamas soldier” on a Greek life website. A few days after the postings, 21-year-old Cornell student Patrick Dai [was arrested](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/us/cornell-university-antisemitic-threat-suspect-wednesday/index.html) and federally charged with [making online threats.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/us/cornell-university-antisemitic-threat-suspect-wednesday/index.html) He has not entered a plea.

CNN visited the campuses of Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, to hear from students about what it’s been like on campus.

**Malak Abuhashim, Cornell University**

“This has been an issue that’s affected me my entire life,” Malak Abuhashim said. The Cornell chemical engineering student is Palestinian and said she reluctantly decided to lead the Cornell chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine because she felt like she had to.

This was not the first time she’d been personally affected by war in the region, even while in college. She has family in Gaza. She’d been on the phone with them and could hear explosions in the background, and said it was hard being so far from them.

Ad Feedback

On October 7, when, like many people around the world, Abuhashim still didn’t know the scale of the Hamas attacks in Israel, she was already “really, really worried,” she said. “I knew right away that whatever happened in Israel, Gaza would be punished 20,000 times more. I knew that the consequences were going to be very severe. I knew that the destruction was going to be horrible.”

She said an aunt was leaving northern Gaza along an evacuation route when an airstrike hit a bus only a few cars ahead of her in traffic. CNN could not independently verify this incident. Her family hasn’t been able to contact other relatives. “We really aren’t sure who is alive, who isn’t.” She’d seen a story about [an Al Jazeera reporter whose family was killed](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/26/media/al-jazeera-journalist-family-killed-gaza/index.html) in an explosion in Gaza. She wondered: If that had happened to her family, would she even know?

College is a place to learn, but ignorance can still sting. “What really hurt the most was when students would try to deny my history or my past,” Abuhashim said.  
“For example, my grandparents’ village was ethnically cleansed. And when I brought this up to a student, they tried to erase the history and be like, ‘No, they left willingly.’” Abuhashim thought it was absurd, the idea her grandparents would give up their livelihood to live in a refugee camp. “That’s what allows this type of hatred, this type of division between people – where someone’s so convinced in this tunnel vision that they’re correct.”

The national chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine has drawn intense criticism for calling the Hamas attacks a “historic win.” Abuhashim said she did not work with the national group or get talking points from it. Her chapter of SJP was focused on supporting students on campus, whether pushing the administration to show them more support or protecting students from outside groups trying to dox them (or post their identifying information online).

She was upset when she saw the antisemitic threats made to her fellow Cornell students. “Those were very hateful things to say,” she said. As a Muslim, she thought it was “very disrespectful” to make them “in the name of Allah.” She said, “Antisemitism will never be accepted in our movement.”

**Zoe Bernstein, Cornell University**

Zoe Bernstein had never felt antisemitism on campus at Cornell, where she’s a senior and president of Cornellians for Israel. But the shock of the antisemitic online threats had “amplified all of the feelings of despair,” she said.

She said she interpreted the hateful messages as being directed at all Jewish students on campus, and she said she feels a disconnect between the campus threats and what was happening in Israel.

That was also true of antisemitic incidents around the world. “I think that does conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism. And I think that unfortunately, right now, it seems like they’re pretty inextricably linked,” she said. “You can criticize any government in the world but you don’t have to come attack civilians in other countries about it.”

Bernstein says she has family and friends in Israel, and she was disturbed by how quickly misinformation spread online. Many students felt pressure to post *something*, she said.

“People think that their silence is kind of complacency on either side. And I just don’t know how much I agree with that,” she said.

When peers posted misinformation, others would swoop into the comments to correct them. “And then students have become embarrassed, students have become ashamed, students have become angry. And it’s just amplifying tensions.” She wanted the campus to calm down so they could go back to focusing on their studies.

Bernstein wore a gold Star of David necklace draped over a black turtleneck. She wasn’t scared to wear it, even with the threats. “I wear it with pride. I’m wearing it more now than I ever have before,” she said. “I’m so, so proud to be a Jew at this time, seeing the resiliency of my community, seeing the unity of my community. It really has only strengthened me in my pride since October 7.”

Momodou Taal was shocked by the threats. Taal, a second-year PhD student at Cornell, grew up in London, but his family is from Gambia and Senegal. He said he was a member of the college’s Coalition of Mutual Liberation that supported pro-Palestine rallies. “Our movement is anti-racist. And we have made it quite clear that we’re not going to stand for any antisemitism,” Taal said.

He was also worried about backlash from last week’s antisemitic online threats. “Given the climate we’re in, we are going to be demonized by those statements, even if it came from none of us.”

He was frustrated with being asked, again and again, if he condemned Hamas. He doesn’t represent Hamas and he has no control over Hamas, he said. He felt like there was an implicit presumption in the question that he supports terrorism.

“I can say clearly categorically I abhor the killing of all civilians no matter where they are and who does it,” Taal said. “I love life. I don’t love death. That’s what I am as a human being. Why is it the association because I’m a Muslim and I’m a Blackperson, I have to condemn a proscribed terrorist organization before having an opinion on genocide?”

“I don’t go around asking White people, ‘Do you condemn the KKK?’ Why is there an assumption that you’d be supporting the KKK in the first place?”

He felt ignored and marginalized as a Muslim, especially a Black Muslim, on campus. But even so, “I feel encouraged – because history is on my side. The same people in the 80s that called Nelson Mandela a terrorist, and literally armed and backed apartheid, were on the wrong side of history,” Taal said. “I feel like we’re on the right side of history.”

**Talia, Cornell University**

After Talia saw the threats, she and a friend spent the rest of the evening in their apartment, scared to leave. A junior at Cornell, she kept pepper spray in her pocket, and reached for it when she heard a knock at the door. (It was just a friend coming to visit.)

For Talia, who did not want her last name published, the threats immediately recalled the experience of her parents: Iranian Jews who fled their country fearing religious persecution. “It’s absurd that I can even connect Iran in the 80s to Cornell in 2023,” she said. “This isn’t anything that we thought we would ever have to deal with in the United States.”

Cornell’s administration and police had been very supportive, she said. “But at the same time, it is such a helpless feeling to know that you can’t stop someone from coming into your house and shooting you point-blank in the face, which was the exact threat. And it only takes one person.”

Some students had decided to go to class via Zoom, she said. “There were people on Zooms in classes that I didn’t even know were Jewish,” she said. “But at the end of the day, a threat to Jews, it doesn’t matter whether you’re religious or you’re cultural, it is a threat to all Jews.”

**Sean, University of Pennsylvania**

“This is personal for me,” Sean, a sophomore at Penn, said. His father was born a Catholic in Northern Ireland during the Catholic-Protestant sectarian strife known as the Troubles. He said he’d learned through his father what it was like to be discriminated against and to be called a terrorist for opposing an “oppressive regime.”

Sean asked for his last name not to be used as he saw echoes of that in the backlash to pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses, with [university donors withdrawing support,](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/us/israel-palestinians-university-debate/index.html) and CEOs saying [they wouldn’t hire students](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/02/business/law-firms-antisemitism-universities/index.html) who signed controversial pro-Palestinian statements. Even his dad had joked, “Don’t go on CNN,” because it might make it impossible for Sean to get a job, he said.

“You see thousands of children dying, it doesn’t take a terrorist to want to support them,” Sean said. “It doesn’t take someone with bad will to support life.”

There was controversy over a common chant at the pro-Palestine protests: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” Some Jewish students told CNN they heard it as a call for Jewish genocide in Israel, whose borders include the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Sean again looked at the experience of his dad, who was from Derry. “They have ‘Free Derry’ on every wall to say they do not support the British government. They say that they want their own homes back. Is that terrorism? To have your home taken from you and want it back? No, that’s just living life.”

**Beni Romm, University of Pennsylvania**

For Beni Romm, “From the river to the sea” had a different meaning. Romm is a freshman at Penn, but he spent two years after high school studying in Israel at a yeshiva, a traditional Jewish educational institution. The chant, he thought, meant one thing in the Middle East and another to Americans. To Romm, “It says that we don’t want any Jewish state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River; we want only a Palestinian state.”

“Calls for ‘from the river to the sea’ … although they can be construed as a calling for things other than Jewish genocide, touch a certain nerve in the Jewish conscience of existential threat,” Romm said. Those chants would never invite a conversation with Jewish students, he said.

Romm had seen a pro-Palestinian protest while walking to a physics quiz, and initially just stopped to listen. But after 45 minutes, “I started being perturbed by what was being said … Things like ‘shame on the IDF,’ ‘the IDF is committing genocide,’” he said. He had friends his age in Israel who were serving in the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces. “This call of ‘shame on the IDF,’ and even like ‘shame on Israel’ – which to me speaks to shame on Israel and Jews in general – hits very personally, because these are my friends and my family. And I don’t believe that they’re committing genocide, as the allegations have it.”

At a later pro-Palestine rally, Romm and some friends set up a table nearby, and had a few good conversations with students who disagreed. But he said he’d been taken aback when, while having a conversation with a Black student, someone walked up and said, “Are you being racist to him? I hope you’re not being racist, like you’re being racist to everyone else on campus.” There were other incidents he felt were connected. He said a friend from class had called him a fascist on social media. A Jewish fraternity was hit with graffiti that said “Jews R Nazis.” Romm thought the anger at Israel was now being directed at Jewish students.

“There is a connection between protests that say the Israeli government is a fascist government, Zionism is racist, and that Israel is perpetrating genocide … and actions towards Jews on campus of calling us racist, or calling us fascist, or accusing us writ large of being Nazis and perpetrating genocide,”

If Ramallah has a center, it is Al-Manara Square. Six roads meet here, and pedestrians weave their way confidently across the tight roundabout, forcing cars to make way. It is always busy.

Demonstrators will rally here to protest, but when CNN visited on a Sunday morning, people were going about their business. All the same, photos from the war in [Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-20-23/index.html) posted in the square and hung on banners and fences remind anyone who needs reminding of the horrors unfolding not far away.

“This destruction resembles the conscience of the world,” reads one poster, under a picture of rescue workers clearing rubble.

Another photograph shows ambulances outside a hospital with the text, “Medical Heroes demand action: Stop the Massacre in Gaza!”

At his office about a mile away, where desks and shelves groan under piles of paperwork, Khalil Shikaki is thinking about the conflict.

Palestinians, he says, overwhelmingly support the Hamas decision to go to war with Israel

His research company, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), has just published the findings of its latest survey into Palestinian attitudes.

Seven hundred and fifty adults were interviewed face to face in the West Bank, and 481 were interviewed in Gaza, also in person. The Gaza data collection was done during the recent truce, when it was safer for researchers to move about.

The survey, which has a four-point margin of error (rather than the usual three-point), found that almost three-quarters (72%) of all respondents believe Hamas’s decision to launch its attack on Israel on October 7 was “correct.”

Less than a quarter (22%) said it was “incorrect.”

But that doesn’t mean support for atrocities, he adds. “No one should see this as support for any atrocities that might have been committed by Hamas on that day.”

“Palestinians believe that diplomacy and negotiations are not an option available to them, that only violence and armed struggle is the means to end the siege and blockade over Gaza, and in general to end the Israeli occupation,” Shikaki said.

This important distinction is teased out by three of the poll’s data points. Almost 80% of respondents told PCPSR researchers that killing women and children in their homes is a war crime.

An even higher number (85%) of respondents said they had not watched videos shown by international news outlets of acts committed by Hamas on October 7 – a figure which may hint at why only 10% of those surveyed said they believed Hamas had committed war crimes that day.

To a considerable extent, Palestinians, just like Israelis, are getting a skewed perspective from their media. In addition to this bubble effect, Shikaki says, there might also be a desire to avoid other sources to maintain deniability. Denial, as he says, is useful during periods of stress and pain.

Polling in a war zone comes with difficulties even in the lulls. Interviewing people in the center and south of the enclave was relatively straightforward as most were still at home, but surveying people from the north of Gaza was partially compromised because so many had been displaced to shelters.

**Separated territories, divergent attitudes**

Gaza and the West Bank, what are now called the Palestinian territories, have been geographically separated since 1948. Recent decades have seen that separation take root between the two populations, not least because it has become harder and harder for Palestinians to move between the territories.

Since 2005, when Israel moved its soldiers and settlers out of Gaza and essentially sealed off the territory with help from Egypt, the day-to-day experiences of Palestinians in Gaza have diverged even further from those of [Palestinians in the West Bank](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/11/middleeast/west-bank-restrictions-violence-intl-cmd/index.html).

Politically, the territories are split. The Palestinian Authority under aging President Mahmoud Abbas has partial control over the West Bank, while Hamas controls what goes on inside Gaza – or it did until Israel invaded.

These differences are reflected across the attitudes surveyed, in particular, on the use of violence.

In Gaza, support for armed struggle has risen only slightly from 50% in September 2022 (a year before the current war) to 56% in December 2023. In the West Bank, however, support has been rising dramatically from 35% in September 2022 to 54% in September 2023 (a month before the war). This month, polled support for armed struggle reached 68% in the West Bank.

Shikaki says these divergences reflect the rise in attacks by violent Jewish settlers on Palestinians in the West Bank, which have drawn condemnation from the US and Europe, along with the pervasive sense that Israel’s current hard-right government is not overly perturbed by that state of affairs.

Hamas, unsurprisingly perhaps, finds growing support, especially among West Bank Palestinians. Backing for the militant group as a political party has increased there nearly four-fold (from 12% to 44%) in the three months between September 2023 and December 2023.

In besieged Gaza, by contrast, support has remained relatively stable with 38% support in September and 42% in December.

Fatah, the secular-nationalist party of Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas, which led the Palestine Liberation Organization to its historic agreements with Israel in the 1990s — which created the PA but crucially did not get around to solving some of the conflict’s most fundamental issues — has seen its support fall across the territories from 26% three months ago to 17% now.

Support for Abbas himself is even lower – so low, in fact, that he is seen as almost entirely discredited.

**Out of denial, towards a reckoning?**

But Shikaki cautions that higher support for Hamas should not be over-stated, at least not yet. As more Palestinians come to terms with the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7, so attitudes could change — though that is unlikely to be the case so long as Gaza remains under massive attack.

Important again is how many people have watched videos from October 7 and the differences between the territories. In Gaza, 25% of those asked said they had viewed such videos; and 16% of all respondents told researchers Hamas had committed war crimes. In the West Bank, the corresponding numbers were just 7% and 1%.

Gaza is moving out of denial more quickly than the West Bank, Shikaki says, and that means a reckoning for Hamas. Already, only 38% of Gazans want to see the militant group return to governance after the war

But it is not just greater awareness of events on a single day that matter. It is also what happens when politics resumes when the war is over, and whether Palestinians see any sort of political horizon.

At a time when people believe the only way to get Israel to end the occupation is by inflicting pain and suffering on Israelis, Palestinians see Hamas as the party most capable of delivering violence effectively, Shikaki says.

On the other hand, “if and when you give the Palestinians the option of negotiating a permanent end to Israeli occupation and the creation of a Palestinian state … support for Hamas will probably decline to below where it was before the war,” he says.

Support for the two-state solution has remained largely stable across Gaza and the West Bank over the past three months, moving from 32% to 34%, but historically, those figures are still low. In the past, PCPSR polling has shown support for the existence of an independent Palestine sitting next to the state of Israel at between 70% and 80%.

US President Joe Biden has sought to convince both Israelis and the Palestinians that ﻿he sees negotiations as important, saying last month, “I don’t think (the conflict) ultimately ends until there is a two-state solution.” The problem is, Palestinians do not seem to believe him. Nearly three-quarters (70%) of respondents said they do not regard US talk about Palestinian statehood as serious.

Shikaki says it is obvious why this is so.

“Since you have all that power, people are not going to believe you if you say, well, I can’t use leverage against Israel. So, the conclusion is you are paying lip service to the two-state solution, but you have absolutely no intention of doing anything to make it a reality.”

A 48-hour extension to the Israel-Hamas truce will not pause the strategic dilemmas and political headaches wracking the Biden administration over the war.

Although the two extra days of hostage releases, the release of Palestinian prisoners and humanitarian aid pouring into Gaza validate an intense diplomatic effort in which the US is deeply involved, the situation remains delicate and a resumption of fighting ultimately seems likely.

— The most urgent question facing the White House is: [Where are the Americans?](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/24/middleeast/who-are-the-hostages-released-on-friday-intl/index.html) Despite hopes that at least three US citizens would be released during the original four-day pause, only orphaned 4-year-old American-Israeli girl [Abigail Edan](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/26/politics/abigail-edan-jake-sullivan-national-security-adviser-israel-gaza-hostages-cnntv) came out of Gaza, to the deep disappointment of US officials.

And while Israel is signaling it is open to another extension, it is also warning that an eventual resumption of its offensive against Hamas will be more intense than before the truce. That could cause more civilian casualties, like earlier in the war, which included bombing of civilian areas and sieges over Gaza hospitals. Any domestic political relief Biden enjoys during the pause, amid deep divisions in his Democratic Party ahead of next year’s election, is therefore unlikely to last long after air strikes begin again.

— There are also growing indications that Biden’s push for more than $14 billion in aid for Israel is running into even deeper uncertainty on Capitol Hill. The package has been caught up in controversies over a larger Ukraine aid package and US southern border security in a way that is underscoring how ungovernable domestic politics are now severely hampering Washington’s capacity to work its will abroad. Israeli defense officials visited Capitol Hill Monday evening to meet with a handful of Senate Democrats about the Israel-Hamas war, according to a person familiar with the meeting. The unclassified meeting gave Democrats the opportunity to ask questions about the war as many in their party have grown concerned about Israel’s offensive in Gaza. The issue of placing conditions on Israel aid has become a hot-button matter among Democrats, who expect to discuss it at lunch Tuesday.

— While the administration’s stern warnings to its adversaries have so far helped contain the conflict, fears of regional escalation are not yet dimmed. The dangers for US personnel were underscored when American officials said Sunday that two ballistic missiles were fired from Houthi rebel-controlled Yemen toward a US warship in the Gulf of Aden.

**The missing Americans**

US officials watched Hamas’ release of another 11 hostages on Monday – the final day of the original truce deal – especially carefully. They had hoped two American women who were abducted during the Hamas terror attacks on October 7 would be freed. But they did not emerge, leaving officials to pin their hopes on them being part of extended releases by Hamas over the next two days.

“It’s difficult to ascertain how they go about making up these lists,” National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer on Monday. “We certainly would hope in the next two days, in the next couple of installments, that we will see some Americans come out.

Yehuda Beinin – whose daughter Liat Beinin, 49, is one of the two America women with dual Israeli citizenship – said that his family remained deeply worried for her and her husband Aviv Atzili, who is also believed to be a hostage. “We have no choice other than to remain hopeful,” he told CNN’s Erin Burnett.

Among the grave problems facing the administration is that it is still not certain how many Americans are being held in Gaza and whether all of those who Washington suspects are captive are still alive. “We think the number is less than 10, probably in the neighborhood of, you know, about eight to nine,” Kirby told reporters at a White House briefing. “But we don’t necessarily have firm, solid information on each and every one of them.”

Another complication is that 40 hostages are believed not to be held by Hamas but by other Palestinian militant groups, including Islamic Jihad, according to a diplomatic source, although it can’t be known for certain whether Americans are included among those.

A senior administration official said Monday that the White House does not believe “so far” that Hamas purposefully held back two American women who the US had hoped would be freed as part of Hamas’ release of 50 hostages over the four-day truce.

Hostage releases so far have concentrated on women and child captives and hopes are not high for the imminent release of young male hostages, who experts say will be viewed as a more valuable human currency by Hamas leaders as they seek to increase the price for hostage releases. Currently, the ratio stands at three Palestinians freed from Israeli jails in return for one captive from the October 7 attacks. Israel has also not released any males over the age of 18 years old. The possibility of a resumption of fighting if truces are not indefinitely extended is also creating deep uncertainty about the eventual fate of all the male hostages. Anxiety is especially acute for members of the Israeli armed forces who were captured.

Rachel Goldberg’s 23-year-old son, Hersh, was severely wounded and kidnapped by Hamas during its attack on the Nova Music festival. She told CNN’s Jake Tapper on Monday that none of the released hostages had been able to provide any intelligence about his whereabouts or condition. “We’re very, very worried. We feel like the clock is ticking, time is ticking,” Goldberg said. “Here is this extremely wounded young man, American civilian, and we’re worried like any parent would be.”

Security experts believe it’s likely that Hamas understands the potential increased leverage from holding onto US hostages. That includes the possibility they could lead to stepped up American pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to extend a pause that has given Hamas fighters time to regroup after relentless Israeli strikes and to dig in for a resumed operation that is still expected to unfold.

The return of lawmakers to Washington this week following the Thanksgiving break is likely to increase domestic heat on Biden to free Americans held captive in Gaza, especially from Republicans always looking to portray him as weak. “Apparently, Hamas is so contemptuous of President Biden and American power that they feel the imperative to release Filipinos and Thai hostages before they release American hostages,” GOP Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas said on Fox on Sunday.

**When fighting begins again**

While hostage releases and aid shipments into Gaza guaranteed under the original deal have offered blessed humanitarian relief to Palestinians, no one believes the truce will be permanent. US efforts to extend the pause are stepping up. Officials announced Monday that Secretary of State Antony Blinken would head back to the region this week on a trip that includes stops in Dubai, the West Bank and Israel.

If fighting starts again, Israeli operations arelikely to target areas including densely populated southern Hamas strongholds and teeming refugee camps, raising the likelihood of large civilian casualties and a consequent international backlash against Israel. Biden has already felt the political downside of such operations – internationally from US allies and domestically from key young, progressive and Muslim American voters he needs to show up in large numbers in next year’s election, and even, according to [a Washington Post report](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/11/26/biden-white-house-divisions-israel-gaza/), among his own staff. The likelihood therefore is that he’ll face a similar or even more intense political headache when the war begins again.

Biden has been isolated on this issue from many American and foreign leaders and officials that he would normally regard as political friends. That will raise the question of whether he will shift from his staunch refusal to call on Netanyahu to observe a permanent ceasefire – a move that would hurt Israel’s bid to crush Hamas.

**Fears of escalation**

Presidents rarely get credit for stopping disasters that don’t happen. But the Biden administration can claim vital success so far in ensuring that the conflict has not become a full regional war following its stern warnings to traditional adversaries and shows of military force – including the dispatch of two aircraft carrier groups to waters near Israel.

But while US foes like Iran have yet to dive into the conflict, and an escalation has so far been avoided, the administration must maintain constant vigilance.

In one sign of the risks, two ballistic missiles fell within 10 nautical miles of the USS Mason, a guided-missile destroyer in the Gulf of Aden that went to the aid of a tanker that came under attack from suspected Somali pirates, US officials said. The missiles were fired from areas controlled by Houthi rebels in Yemen, a Shia group backed in the past by Iran. Houthis have launched numerous attacks against US interests in the region, and Israel, since the October 7 Hamas assault. The USS Mason did not attempt to shoot down the missiles and the Pentagon has not said if the vessel was specifically targeted.

Mark Esper, who served as defense secretary in the Trump administration, warned against seeing the incident as a coincidence. “I don’t think the administration response has been sufficient with regards to attacks by Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere,” Esper told CNN.

He added: “I know they are concerned — they fear that if they do too much it will escalate. My argument is just the opposite. If they don’t do enough, the attacks will continue, (and) at some point Americans will be killed and that’s when it will escalate.”

Former President Barack Obama said a way forward for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is only possible if people acknowledge the “complexity” of the situation.

“If there’s any chance of us being able to act constructively to do something, it will require an admission of complexity and maintaining what on the surface may seem contradictory ideas that what Hamas did was horrific, and there’s no justification for it. And … that the occupation and what’s happening to Palestinians is unbearable,” Obama said in an interview on the podcast “Pod Save America.”

The former president’s comments come as the Israeli military focuses its offensive against Hamas in Gaza City and northern parts of the enclave.

Behind the scenes, American officials also believe there is limited time for Israel to try to accomplish its stated objective of taking out Hamas in its current operation before uproar over the humanitarian suffering and civilian casualties reaches a tipping point.

Obama specifically criticized the discourse on social media and “TikTok” activism about the issue.

“If you want to solve the problem, then you have to take in the whole truth, and you then have to admit nobody’s hands are clean – that all of us are complicit to some degree,” he said.

Millions have [turned to platforms](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/14/tech/social-media-misinformation-israel-hamas/index.html) like TikTok and Instagram in hopes of comprehending the brutal conflict in real time, but Obama said he would rather see people “out there talking to people.”

“Including people who you disagree with. If you genuinely want to change this … you’ve got to figure out how to speak to somebody on the other side and listen to them and understand what they are talking about and not dismiss it,”

both sides have been [accused of war crimes](https://cnn.com/2023/11/09/middleeast/un-rights-chief-israel-hamas-war-crimes-hnk-intl/index.html).

The conflict is covered by a complex system of international law developed after World War II, which attempts to balance humanitarian concerns and the military requirements of states. Delivering justice would be the work of many organizations over many years, but the process has already begun.

So who will decide if war crimes have been committed, what will the criteria be, and will anyone ever be held to account?

**Which laws apply to the conflict?**

Conflicts are governed by two bodies of law. The first, the law on the use of force, aims to prevent conflict by dictating the conditions under which states may resort to force.

The second, called the “law of armed conflict” (LOAC) or “international humanitarian law” (IHL), regulates the conduct of states during war and seeks to limit suffering once they have begun.

Modern IHL is built around the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which have been ratified by almost all UN members. The conventions have since been supplemented by Additional Protocols and by rulings at international tribunals.

Israel, however, has not ratified the first and second additional protocols, which were introduced in 1977 to cover areas like collective punishments and the use of new weapons. But since these provisions are considered a norm of customary international law, they are nonetheless binding on all states.

Some [dispute](https://www.justsecurity.org/75487/self-defense-against-non-state-actors-all-over-the-map/#:~:text=The%20use%20of%20force%20against%20non%2Dstate%20actors%20in%20the,consent%20of%20the%20state%20concerned.) whether international law applies to non-state actors like Hamas. But the State of Palestine – which is how the Palestinians are represented at the UN as a non-member observer – has acceded to the Geneva Conventions and its three additional protocols. Given this, Hamas – which governs a Palestinian territory – must comply with their terms. The State of Palestine is also a signatory to the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), meaning Hamas leaders are accountable for war crimes.

**Is there evidence of war crimes in the fighting between Hamas and Israel?**

Not all violations of international humanitarian law constitute a war crime. A war crime is an especially grave violation of IHL. A [UN report](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/commission-inquiry-collecting-evidence-war-crimes-committed-all-sides-israel#:~:text=The%20Commission%20is%20gravely%20concerned,lives%20and%20constitutes%20collective%20punishment.) said last month said it was collecting evidence of war crimes in the wake of Hamas’ indiscriminate massacre of civilians and its abduction of more than 200 hostages.

The report said Israel may be committing the war crime of collective punishment, after officials ordered the “complete siege” of Gaza. A number of prominent human rights groups [concur](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/08/human-rights-watch-letter-eu-foreign-ministers-gaza) with the UN’s assessment.

When he visited the [Rafah Crossing](https://cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/rafah-crossing-gaza-egypt-explainer-intl/index.html) from Egypt into Gaza, Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, called the October 7 attacks “atrocities”, saying they – and the holding of hostages – were war crimes.

But he added “the collective punishment by Israel of Palestinian civilians amounts also to a war crime, as does the unlawful forcible evacuation of civilians.”

Some have argued Israel’s actions in Gaza constitute [genocide](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/gaza-is-running-out-of-time-un-experts-warn-demanding-a-ceasefire-to-prevent-genocide/). In an open letter, a group of UN experts said they “remain convinced that the Palestinian people are at grave risk of genocide,” although the crime is harder to prove under international law.

Other [experts](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/un-expert-warns-new-instance-mass-ethnic-cleansing-palestinians-calls) warn that Israel’s response, which has involved the displacement of more than a million Gazans from the north of the strip, poses a danger of becoming [ethnic cleansing](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/un-expert-warns-new-instance-mass-ethnic-cleansing-palestinians-calls). However, ethnic cleansing still [lacks a precise legal definition](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.shtml), and it is not recognized as an independent crime under international law.

**What does proportionality mean?**

Article 51 of the [UN charter](https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text#:~:text=Article%2051,maintain%20international%20peace%20and%20security.), which governs the use of force, gives states the right of self-defense, provided the force they use is necessary and proportionate. Proportionality is not about inflicting symmetrical harm. It means the defending state cannot use more force than is needed to respond to a threat.

Legal experts argue that Israel has considerable scope to respond to Hamas’ October 7 attack, and that its stated aim to “destroy” Hamas can be justified under international law.

“The incidents of October 7 alone triggered the right of Israel to resort to military force and to… put an end to the fighting wing of Hamas,” Michael Schmitt, a professor of international law at the University of Reading in the United Kingdom,

Hamas has shown [no intention to relent](https://x.com/MEMRIReports/status/1719662664090075199?s=20). Its [founding charter](https://embassies.gov.il/holysee/AboutIsrael/the-middle-east/Pages/The%20Hamas-Covenant.aspx) mandates the killing of Jews and the destruction of the state of Israel. In an interview shortly after October 7, Ghazi Hamad, a senior Hamas leader, told a Lebanese TV channel: “We will do this again and again.” He said the attack was “just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth.”

While many consider Israel’s aim to destroy Hamas legitimate, others fear the force required to achieve this would be disproportionate.

“The mainstream view in international law is that the only legitimate aim of self-defense is halting and repelling an ongoing armed attack, or perhaps preventing an imminent armed attack. Typically, the total destruction of the enemy would not be necessary to achieve that goal,” Adil Haque, a law professor at Rutgers University in the United States, told CNN.

“Some would argue that Hamas’s intent and capacity to launch future attacks makes it necessary to destroy it completely. But I would argue that the total harm this path would inflict on civilians renders it disproportionate. Israel has to settle for less than total victory.”

Israel must abide by a second type of proportionality under international humanitarian law. Under IHL, all states must minimize civilian casualties. Intentionally directing attacks against civilians is always illegal, but an attack that kills civilians incidentally can be legal if it achieves a military purpose, [provided](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule14#:~:text=armed%20conflictsInterpretation-,Rule%2014.,military%20advantage%20anticipated%2C%20is%20prohibited.) the harm caused to civilians is not “excessive” in relation to the military advantage anticipated.

When deciding whether to strike a target, Schmitt said commanders consult lawyers to complete proportionality calculations. Here, officials weigh expected civilian harm against expected military advantage. The greater the military advantage, the greater harm to civilians can be considered proportionate.

Schmitt, a former targeting officer and judge advocate in the US Air Force, said this calculation is “the hardest decision a commander can make on the battlefield, because there’s no bright-line test.”

“from the very beginning” in pre-planned attacks. “They would have a lot of intelligence and then therefore be able to have a fairly robust understanding of the military advantages that they’re seeking to achieve and, equally, also have a fairly robust understanding of the civilian harm that they may be causing,” he said.

The legality of a strike must be judged on the basis of information available at the time, rather than with hindsight. This makes forming a judgment on a particular strike a fraught task, due to the lack of information about how the IDF assesses the threshold for civilian casualties.

The sheer scale of Israel’s bombardment – which has [destroyed nearly half of Gaza’s housing](https://cnn.com/interactive/2023/middleeast/map-humanitarian-aid-water-power-hospitals-gaza-strip-dg/index.html) –  could suggest Israel’s definition of “military targets” is at best loose and at worst potentially criminal.

“The amount of destruction is very, very significant,” said Sari. “I think it’s important and entirely appropriate to ask questions, robust questions, as to whether Israel is in all of these cases complying with its obligations. That is ultimately something for the IDF to answer.”

**Can Israel target hospitals and refugee camps?**

Israel’s targeting of civilian areas like hospitals has caused unimaginable suffering and drawn fierce criticism. After its strikes on the [Jabalya refugee camp](https://cnn.com/2023/10/31/middleeast/jabalya-blast-gaza-intl/index.html), which destroyed several buildings and, according to the Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry, killed hundreds, the UN said the attack could amount to a war crime, given “the high number of civilian casualties and the scale of destruction.”

While none dispute the horror of such attacks, legal experts are divided over whether they necessarily violate IHL.

“It is entirely legitimate and completely understandable to abhor the catastrophic consequences inflicted upon the civilian population as a result of the attack on the Jabalia refugee camp,” wrote Brian Cox, an adjunct law professor at Cornell University in the US, in a [recent paper](https://www.ejiltalk.org/in-defence-of-doctrinal-assessments-proportionality-and-the-31-october-attack-on-the-jabalia-refugee-camp/). “As unimaginably horrifying as those effects are, this reality alone does not render the attack illegal.”

Civilian buildings are protected under IHL, but protection is not unconditional. “They can lose their protection if they are used outside of their humanitarian function to commit acts harmful to the enemy,” Cordula Droege, chief legal officer of the International Committee of the Red Cross, explained in a [video](https://twitter.com/icrc/status/1724388220496920723?s=48). Using buildings like hospitals to house combatants and weapons can turn civilian objects into legitimate military targets.

Hamas has long been [known](https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/hamas_human_shields.pdf?zoom=page-fit) to station military operations inside buildings like hospitals – a practice known as “human shielding.” Human shielding is a [war crime](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule97) – but also a common military tactic during asymmetrical warfare.

“It’s clear that Hamas is outgunned by the Israelis – in a big way,” Schmitt told CNN. Unable to match the IDF’s strike capabilities, it aims instead to deter it from striking at all. The more civilians that can be put in harm’s way, the less likely is an attack to be proportionate – and so the more likely it is to be unlawful. Hamas’ tactic apparently is to make it as hard as possible for Israel to strike them without violating – or at least without appearing to violate – international law.

“Human shielding is a horrific practice, but there is military utility to it,” said Schmitt, the law professor. “That is exactly why Hamas is encouraging people not to leave Gaza City. ” And so it is possible for both sides to violate IHL in the same instance: Hamas by using human shields,  and Israel by launching a disproportionate strike. The former violation does not excuse or permit the latter; any strike must abide by the principle of proportionality.

In response to the Jabalya strikes, the IDF said it achieved significant military advantages, damaging Hamas’ tunnels and killing dozens of its operatives, including Ibrahim Biari, a commander the IDF said was responsible for the October 7 attack. But whether the civilian harm caused by the strike was greater than the IDF expected, or whether it decided ex ante that such a level of destruction was nonetheless proportionate, is not clear.

Ultimately, however, the conflict may reach a point where such distinctions seem beside the point. An act can be legally justified and morally abhorrent. And even if the IDF can justify particular strikes under IHL, its actions may become constrained by public opinion. [Huge pro-Palestinian demonstrations](https://cnn.com/2023/11/11/us/pro-palestine-protesters-new-york-city/index.html) have been held across the globe, causing even Israel’s staunchest allies to [temper their support](https://cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-11-23/h_5b9c2eba7219ba2cb25568dc79a323ab) as its window of perceived legitimacy shrinks.

“Even if a targeted strike may be justifiable from a legal perspective, first impressions frame the narrative,” noted a 2019 NATO [report](https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/hamas_human_shields.pdf?zoom=page-fit) on Hamas’ use of human shields in Gaza. “Public opinion tends to be influenced more by images depicting the suffering of innocent civilians than by well-thought-out legal arguments.”

**Who will rule on whether war crimes have been committed?**

The ICC is an international court established to investigate individuals accused of committing the most serious crimes, such as war crimes. It steps in when governments are unable or unwilling to investigate alleged crimes committed on their soil. It opened in The Hague in 2002, but many of the world’s major powers – including the US, China and Russia – are not members.

Israel is not a member of the ICC and rejects the court’s jurisdiction. That has not stopped the court from [investigating](https://www.icc-cpi.int/palestine) its actions in the occupied Palestinian territories. Fatou Bensouda, then the ICC’s prosecutor, spent five years conducting a “painstaking preliminary examination” and [concluded](https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-fatou-bensouda-conclusion-preliminary-examination-situation-palestine) she was “satisfied that war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.” But no arrests were made, and Bensouda left office in 2021.

While every government and military decision-maker must ensure they abide by international law, it is the job of the ICC to prove they have failed to do so.

[Karim Khan](https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-khan-kc-cairo-situation-state-palestine-and-israel), the current ICC prosecutor, said the acts committed by Hamas on October 7 are “serious violations, if proven, of international humanitarian law.” But he stressed “Israel has clear obligations in relation to its war with Hamas: Not just moral obligations, but legal obligations… It’s there in the Geneva Conventions. It’s there in black and white.”

On the eastern edge of [Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-15-23), dawn is still a few minutes away on the morning of October 7. A group of Hamas militants wait, some packed into a white pickup truck, others on motorbikes. They run through a few final checks, making sure they are recording video and that their weapons are ready.

An explosion in the distance appears to be the signal to move.

As they race to the border, the men shout “Allahu Akbar,” a phrase that means “God is great” in Arabic.

After three minutes of driving, they cross the first border fence that separates Gaza from Israel. The fence is mangled, leaving a large opening through which they pass, though it is difficult to know if it is from the explosion heard moments earlier.

[Video from the attack](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/15/middleeast/bodycam-video-hamas-massacre-tunnels-intl/index.html) provided to CNN by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) offers a new window into a portion of the Hamas operation launched from Gaza’s eastern border. The video comes from the bodycam of one of the terrorists who took part in the attack. The IDF said it released the video to show the reality of what happened on October 7, a day that Israeli officials have compared to 9/11, when an estimated 1,200 people were killed and more than 200 others taken hostage in Hamas’ brutal assault inside Israel.

The video marks the first time that Israel has publicly released footage of Hamas tunnels in Gaza it says were being used on the day of the attack. It’s unclear if the same person is using the camera in the underground clip, which shows a larger room that serves as a junction leading to a series of narrower tunnels. Wires run along the shafts, although there is no apparent overhead lighting. Instead, the only bright spot comes from a flashlight. Some supplies rest on the floor, along with several blue barrels.

At one point, the men underground point the flashlight down into a deep vertical shaft with a ladder running along one side. There is writing in red spray paint on the concrete walls. One sign reads, “What’s hidden is far worse.”

The video of the attack is an unbroken recording of 100 minutes, starting before the assault and continuing until the camera stops. CNN has geolocated the locations seen in the footage and confirmed they match other footage from the attack.

As the group passes the first border fence, the gunman with the camera shouts repeatedly, “Go right!” He appears to know where he is headed, indicating the depth of planning and coordination as Hamas launched a multi-pronged assault across the Gaza border.

Less than two minutes later, the militants cross the second security fence. They are in Israel and heading toward a [kibbutz](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/middleeast/kibbutz-explainer-israel-gaza-intl/index.html), racing along dirt roads between plowed fields among a group of motorbikes. Many of the men have rifles like AK-47s, while some carry rocket-propelled grenades slung across their backs.

Seventeen minutes into the video, the pickup truck stops as the gunman opens fire for the first time across an open field with Israeli buildings visible in the distance. It is unclear if he hits anything. For a few minutes, the group pauses and appears to regroup. One man urges everyone not to shoot into the air and waste fire.

At one point, the group thanks God that they made it this far as they wonder where the Israeli soldiers are. So far, their movement has been virtually unimpeded across Israeli territory.

At a field near the [Israeli town of Kissufim](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/24/exp-israel-kibbutz-collins-pkg-102403aseg1.cnn), the gunman with the bodycam exits the car and advances across a field with other militants. The video shows him run past one man who readies a rocket-propelled grenade on his shoulder. They cover each other as they advance, firing as they move.

The video shows the gunman with the bodycam charging the last bit as he spots an Israeli soldier on the ground. At point blank range, he opens fire repeatedly, killing the soldier.

As other militants catch up, the gunman takes the Israeli soldier’s Tavor rifle. The gunman turns the bodycam on himself for a selfie video. He cheers as others join the celebration.

Moments later, he is more composed as he speaks to the camera, which appears to be mounted on his helmet. He gives his name and says he is 24 years old. He is a father, and he says he killed two Israeli soldiers. He asks God for victory and “well-deserved martyrdom.”

From here, the group advances on motorbikes, speeding along nearly empty Israeli roads.

The gunman shouts with joy as he passes the bodies of Israelis sprawled across the street. His wave of attack was not the first, other terrorists have reached this site before him. As he rounds a corner on the motorbike, he comes to a bus stop that CNN has seen in one of the earliest videos to come out from the day of the attack.

In that video, dashcam footage from an Israeli car escaping rocket fire at the nearby [Nova music festival](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/10/middleeast/hamas-music-festival-attack-investigation-cmd-intl/) shows the car approaching a group of militants who open fire. The bullets pierce the glass and shatter the windshield. The car coasts down the road, the driver almost certainly killed in the hail of bullets. The timestamp on the video shows that it is just after 7:40 in the morning.

It also shows the moment when the gunman with the bodycam arrives at the scene, because the car with the dashcam is visible in his video.

For 65 minutes after they crossed the Gaza fence, the gunman with the bodycam and the group traveling around him had nearly free reign in Israel, traveling along roads and across fields with impunity. They have traveled nearly 10 miles, passing the towns of Ein HaShlosha and Kisufim.

Now the group approaches a military base near the kibbutz of Re’im. The gunman closes the distance, firing from the weapon he took from the Israeli soldier as he approaches the gate.

Someone from the base fires back.

The man screams as he is hit, falling to the ground near the weapon. The camera oscillates slightly back and forth as the breathing becomes quick and shallow.

His part in the assault comes to an end. But the terror of the October 7 attacks would rage on for hours to come.

When Palestinians in north Gaza heeded the warnings issued in the Israeli military’s phone calls, text messages, and fliers advising them to head south, they thought they were fleeing to potential safety.

The Israeli Defense Forces issued the guidance Friday, telling all civilians in north Gaza to evacuate to areas south of Wadi Gaza “for your own safety and the safety of your families” as the IDF continues “to operate significantly in Gaza City and make extensive efforts to avoid harming civilians.”

However, some Palestinians who followed the evacuation warnings and fled their homes in search of safety suffered the very fate they were running from: Israeli airstrikes killed them outside of the evacuation zone.

The killings underscore the reality that evacuation zones and warning alerts from the Israeli military haven’t guaranteed safety for civilians in the densely populated Gaza Strip, where Palestinians have [no safe place](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/gaza-airstrikes-warnings-invs/index.html) to escape Israeli bombs.

In the early hours on Friday, Aaed Al-Ajrami and his nephew, Raji, received a phone call from an Israeli military official – warning him to get everyone he knows and head southwards immediately, the nephew told CNN. Despite following the instructions and successfully fleeing south of the evacuation zone, Aaed’s family was killed by an Israeli airstrike the next day.

An audio recording of the phone call obtained by CNN reveals the details of the brief conversation – which included the IDF’s instructions to flee south of the evacuation zone and no guidance on how to get there. Raji said once they realized who was calling, they recorded the conversation so they could share it with other family members.

“All of you go to the South. You and all your family members. Gather all of your stuff with you and head there,” the officer told them.

Aaed wanted to know what road would be safe to take and what time they should leave.

“It doesn’t matter which road,” the officer replied. “Do it as fast as you can. There is no time left.”

Aaed heeded the warning. By sunrise on Friday, he headed south with his family and relatives to stay with friends in Deir Al Balah, a city roughly eight miles south of Wadi Gaza and outside the evacuation zone.

The next day, an Israeli airstrike in the area destroyed parts of the building where Aaed’s family sought refuge – killing him and 12 other members of his family, including seven children.

His nephew Raji, 32, was staying in a different building nearby when he heard the explosion and feared the worst. He rushed to the scene after receiving a call telling him that his uncle’s family members were amongst the victims.

“The destruction was massive,” Raji said. “We started digging people out who were hit by the explosion, some of them were still alive … the gunpowder smell was very strong, the dust was everywhere.”

“These people all thought that they were finally safe and that nothing would happen in the area,” Raji said. “You can follow the orders so that you aren’t exposed to danger, but the danger will still reach you wherever you are.”

In response to CNN’s query about the airstrikes in Deir Al Balah and other areas outside of the evacuation zone, an IDF statement said it’s “operating to dismantle Hamas military and administrative capabilities.”

While an estimated 500,000 Palestinians have fled northern Gaza for the south since Friday, many others are unable to make the journey south of the evacuation zone and are stuck in northern Gaza.

Yara Alhayek, 22, told CNN that her family living in the north had nowhere to seek refuge if they headed south. “We couldn’t leave because there is no safe place to go to … it’s really dangerous if we leave our house, it’s really dangerous if we stay in our house, so we have no idea what to do.”

Israel has defended its ongoing hammering of Gaza with airstrikes as targeting Hamas headquarters and assets which are hidden within civilian buildings, claiming that what may appear as a civilian building is actually “a legitimate military target.”

Independent UN experts have [condemned](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/israeloccupied-palestinian-territory-un-experts-deplore-attacks-civilians#:~:text=GENEVA%20(12%20October%202023)%20%E2%80%93,devastating%20impacts%20on%20the%20whole) Israel’s “indiscriminate attacks against Palestinian civilians.” Doctors Without Borders released an update Sunday night saying the strikes have also hit hospitals and ambulances and decried that the “indiscriminate bombing campaign in which most casualties have been civilians.”

Israel’s military airstrikes have killed more than 2,800 and injured 11,000 since October 7, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said Monday, according to the official Palestinian press agency, WAFA.

Israeli troops and military equipment have massed at the border with Gaza as Israel prepares to ramp up its response to the [deadly October 7 attack](https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/14/hamas-nova-festival-attack-site-visit-cooper-dnt-ac360-vpx.cnn) by the Islamist militant group Hamas. Warplanes continued to blast Gaza over the weekend, as civilians fled southward, following Israel’s evacuation instructions.

Several United Nations agencies have also warned that mass evacuation under such siege conditions will lead to disaster, and that the most vulnerable Gazans, including the elderly and pregnant, may not be able to relocate at all.

“The order to evacuate 1.1 million people from northern Gaza defies the rules of war and basic humanity,” wrote Martin Griffiths, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, in a [statement](https://twitter.com/UNReliefChief/status/1712923531799929300) late Friday. “Roads and homes have been reduced to rubble. There is nowhere safe to go.”

Raji, who has taken in the wounded children that survived the attack, says he has to put on a strong face to support them despite being broken internally.

“I feel the injustice, these are innocent people, what did they do?”

Aliza Samuel walks carefully through debris left strewn across the ground, picking up a bracelet before coming across some small clay trinkets that had been handmade during the [Nova Music Festival](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/10/middleeast/hamas-music-festival-attack-investigation-cmd-intl/).

“People just dropped everything and left,” Samuel says. “(Hamas) just tore everything apart.”

Nearly one month on from the massacre of festival-goers in Re’im in southern Israel by Hamas militants, the 24-year-old has left her home for the first time since that day, to return with CNN to the place she witnessed the murders of four of her friends. More than 260 bodies were found at the site in the aftermath of the assault on October 7, one of the deadliest of the Hamas attacks, which killed at least 1,400 people in Israel.

“I think it’s important for me to come back,” she says. “No matter how painful it is…the world needs to know what happened here.”

But the terror of it all soon comes flooding back.

“I hear everything,” she says. “I hear the screaming, I hear the bikes, and I hear the gunshots.”

Traumatized but trying to process her experience, she recalls the moment that she has played over and over in her mind.

“I saw one of my friends, she was begging for her life,” she says. “She asked him to not kill her, to not kill her, to not kill her, and they didn’t care, they were laughing.”

She explains how, shortly after the break of dawn, her four friends were forced to line up and kneel down in the dust of an arid field.

From her hiding place behind the trees, she overheard the single final word her friends heard from their murderers.

“Enjoy,” the Hamas militants said in English, as they laughed, before shooting the three men and one woman at point-blank range, she said.

A few hours earlier, the friends had all been dancing and having fun together just a few hundred meters away at thefestival, an event billed as a celebration of “unity and love” to mark the Jewish holiday Sukkot.

But the group of thousands of young partygoers proved to be an easy target for the Hamas attackers who broke through Israel’s defenses, descending on the festival via paragliders and motorbikes, massacring festivalgoers and taking others as hostages.

Israel subsequently announced a war against Hamas, the militant group that governs Gaza and launched the coordinated assault. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) began a massive aerial bombardment of Gaza, pounding the tiny strip of land with air strikes, artillery fire and helicopter gunships, followed by a ground offensive.

The IDF says it is targeting the vast network of underground tunnels below Gaza that harbor the Hamas leadership along with their fighters and weaponry. But the onslaught has also led to an immense toll on [Palestinian civilians](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/02/middleeast/israel-gaza-hamas-war-jabalya-camp-strike-intl-hnk/index.html), with more than 9,100 people killed [in Gaza](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/02/middleeast/gaza-hospitals-overwhelmed-as-power-run-out-intl/index.html) since October 7 - the majority of them women and children - according to the latest figures released by the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah, drawn from sources in the Hamas-controlled enclave.

**People ‘had nowhere to run’**

Walking back to her tent where she was sleeping when it all started, Samuel recalls the moment she was jolted awake soon after sunrise by the sound of Hamas rockets flying towards them from Gaza. She said she immediately woke her friend, and they fled their tent to try to find a concrete shelter.

Many of the other festival goers were asleep or still dancing, and either didn’t hear the alarm, or ignored it, placing their trust in Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system to protect them.

But Samuel and her friend didn’t want to take any chances, so they started running. As they sought cover, they suddenly spotted Hamas fighters appearing in the skies above them on paragliders, shooting at people from the air as they came in to land.

Panicking, the pair sprinted across the open farmland surrounding the festival site and dived into a ditch behind a line of large trees. Samuel worked on trying to calm her friend down, clamping her hand over her mouth to stop her screaming, as they began to realize what was unfolding. Others were also hiding behind the trees, “trying not to breathe,” she added.

“(Hamas) came from everywhere,” she said. “(The people) had nowhere to run.”

“I saw Hamas take a bunch of people and went to their commander, and asked if to kill them or to take them,” she said. “And once they were dead, they didn’t stop, they just kept shooting them, and you just saw the body just jump and jump from the bullets, after they were dead.”

Samuel said the Hamas attackers mostly spoke in Arabic, but occasionally they would speak some English. In the parts she could understand, she overheard them express confusion and delight at how far they had made it into Israel and how many people they had been able to attack.

After hiding in the ditch for hours, Samuel and her friend eventually saw army vehicles arrive and decided to make a run for it - stepping through “pools of blood” to escape. Finally, they found some Israeli soldiers who helped them get to safety.

Later, she learned that another male friend at the festival was also found dead – shot in the leg and then later beheaded at a nearby kibbutz.

**‘Complete carnage’**

Helping Samuel through this trauma is her cousin, Dr. Shlomo Gensler, an ICU doctor who was a first responder on October 7.

A rocket alarm sounds during the visit to the scene – and everyone drops to the ground. Samuel begins to panic, breathing rapidly and shaking. Gensler quickly calms her down, assuring her that she is safe.

Gensler, who is still treating patients who were injured that day, walks back through the area where he triaged injured patients during the Hamas attacks. Leftover medical equipment and bullet casings still litter the ground where he worked that night.

“It was just complete carnage, and it was like nothing I’ve ever seen before,” Gensler said.

After seeing the first dead body arrive, he said, “we didn’t realize what would be coming up after that, where it was just hundreds of bodies afterwards, and nonstop.”

Gensler witnessed “houses and villages on fire” nearby, along with seeing civilian cars that had been blown apart by shoulder-propelled grenade launchers, with bodies lying next to them.

Knowing the victims were targeted for being Jewish due to Hamas ideology, and seeing the evidence of “premeditated” intent, made the scenario more emotional, he added.

Still, his colleagues told CNN that the doctor treated around 300 people that night and saved dozens of lives. He also treated some soldiers.

“There was one soldier who came here and he was shaking,” Gensler said. “And I just (held) him in my arms. And this is a big soldier crying in my arms…and I said, you’re going to be OK.”

Now, as Israel wages war across the border, Gensler is following the unfolding humanitarian disaster. “I really cry about the kids in Gaza that are suffering,” he said, adding that they routinely used to treat sick Palestinian children from the strip at his hospital.

But he still wants to remind the world about what happened on October 7 to honor “the people that were slaughtered.”

For those who made it out alive, they are starting to deal with survivor’s guilt for their fallen friends.

“(I’m) sorry that I couldn’t be there for them and save them.. and I am sorry that God didn’t save them,” Samuel said.

“They were amazing people,” she said. “I’m gonna do everything I can to live my life in their name.”

Billionaire hedge fund CEO Bill Ackman and several other business leaders are demanding Harvard University release the names of students whose organizations signed on to a letter blaming solely Israel for the deadly attacks by Hamas.

The CEOs want the [students blacklisted](https://twitter.com/BillAckman/status/1711788747086233661). But some of those students have since distanced themselves from the letter.

“One should not be able to hide behind a corporate shield when issuing statements supporting the actions of terrorists,” Ackman said in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter.

If the members support the letter, the names of the signatories “should be made public so their views are publicly known,” Ackman said. The CEO of Pershing Square Capital Management said he wanted to ensure his company and others don’t “inadvertently hire” any students belonging to Harvard groups that signed the letter.

Following a backlash to the statement, some of the student groups have since withdrawn their endorsements.

Multiple other business leaders, including the CEOs of shopping club [FabFitFun](https://twitter.com/broukhim), health tech startup [EasyHealth](https://twitter.com/ddueltech/status/1711795246965948491) and [Dovehill Capital Management](https://twitter.com/JWurzak/status/1711790142476661174) supported the call from Ackman to name the students.

“I would like to know so I know never to hire these people,” Jonathan Neman, CEO of restaurant chain [Sweetgreen, said on X](https://twitter.com/JonnyNemo/status/1711792010292572647).

Neither Neman nor Ackman responded to requests for comment.

Others warn that naming the students whose groups backed the statement could put the students in harms way and did not account for differences of opinion within the student groups.

Larry Summers, the famed economist who on Monday drew attention to the “morally unconscionable” Harvard student statement, is now preaching caution.

“I yield to no one in my revulsion at the statement apparently made on behalf of 30 plus @Harvard student group,” Summers said in a Wednesday afternoon [post on X.](https://twitter.com/lhsummers/status/1712175642404434280?s=46&t=QaiQawoy7cwVUqbw1hRPJA) “But please everybody take a deep breath. Many in these groups never saw the statement before it went out. In some cases those approving did not understand exactly what they were approving.”

Summers, the former president of Harvard and US Treasury Secretary, added that “probably some were naive and foolish.”

“This is not a time where it is constructive to vilify individuals and I am sorry that is happening,” Summers said.

Harvard professor and legal scholar Laurence Tribe told CNN Wednesday he initially agreed with Ackman but on reflection decided not to join the push to publicize their names.

“Any number of the students who got caught up in this misguided campaign probably didn’t even know there was a statement. Others no doubt didn’t focus on, much less understand, what they were signing,” Tribe said in an email. “Naive and stupid as they may have been, I now think it would be an overreaction to penalize them permanently by publishing their names and implying that they actually endorsed what the terrorists did to innocent Israelis.”

Similarly, Meds.com CEO Stephen Sullivan wrote that people should be “angry at the administration and teachers” but cautioned against putting college students’ names on a list, [according to Forbes](https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianbushard/2023/10/10/billionaire-ackman-others-pledge-they-wont-hire-harvard-students-who-signed-letter-criticizing-israel/?sh=2645820e4cc8).

Harvard University did not immediately respond to a request for comment. But Harvard President Claudine Gay [issued a statement Tuesday](https://www.harvard.edu/president/news/2023/war-in-the-middle-east/?utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=hu-twitter-general&utm_medium=social) saying “no student group – not even 30 student groups – speaks for Harvard University or its leadership.”

**Harvard student groups’ statement**

The controversy comes in response to a joint statement released by a coalition of Harvard student groups following the attacks by Hamas that have [killed more than 1,000 Israelis](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-10-10-23/h_4a279d7bfef2394cc44fd8cfed58135a) and [at least 14 American citizens](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-10-10-23/h_0f30b8fb5e921906bd7c1314f6944a40).

“We, the undersigned student organizations, hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence,” the statement from the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups said.

The statement said millions of Palestinians in Gaza have been “forced to live in an open-air prison” and called on Harvard to “take action to stop the ongoing annihilation of Palestinians.”

A footnote at the bottom of the statement said the names of the “original signing organizations have been concealed at this time.”

Jake Wurzak, the CEO of Dovehill Capital Management, said he believed the students who signed the letter should be named.

“Free Speech is paramount. Words have meaning and students shouldn’t be allowed to hide behind an institution,” Wurzak [said on X](https://twitter.com/JWurzak/status/1712044519623946687).

**Some students withdraw their signatures**

According to the [Harvard Crimson](https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/10/11/student-groups-withdraw-israel-statement/) student newspaper, at least five of the original 34 signatories have withdrawn their endorsements as of Tuesday night.

For example, the Harvard Undergraduate Nepali Student Association [said on Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/p/CyOyCuBOCn5/?hl=en) “we regret” that the decision to co-sign the statement has been “interpreted as a tacit support for the recent violent attacks in Israel.”

“To ensure that our stance on the condemnation of violence by Hamas and support for a just peace remains clear, we retract our signatures from the statement,” the Nepali student group said.

Act on a Dream, a student group supporting immigrants, told the Crimson the group signed the statement as a “result of miscommunication and a lack of due diligence in sharing the statement with the entirety of the board.”

Others responded to Ackman saying students weren’t aware of the letter’s content or that groups they belong to were signing the statement.

Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, told CNN on Wednesday he doesn’t know about the wisdom of releasing the names of the students but called for them to take responsibility on their own.

“It is an outrageously offensive piece and anyone who signed it should either stand behind it and face the consequences in life or step up and apologize and explain themselves,” Greenblatt said. “This is what we learn to do in elementary school. It’s hard for me to understand why it’s complicated for people at Harvard University.”

**Real-life consequences for anti-Israel statement**

Separately, there has been a [backlash against a statement](https://twitter.com/Yair_Rosenberg/status/1711790931299426802) released by the president of the NYU Student Bar Association saying Israel “bears full responsibility for this tremendous loss of life.”

That statement had immediate consequences, with law firm Winston & Strawn promptly pulling a job offer to the NYU student who previously served as a summer associate at the firm.

“These comments are profoundly in conflict with Winston & Strawn’s values as a firm. Accordingly, the Firm has rescinded the law student’s offer of employment,” the law firm said in a [post on X](https://twitter.com/WinstonLaw/status/1711850745383866580/photo/1). “Winston stands in solidarity with Israel’s right to exist in peace and condemns Hamas and the violence and destruction it has ignited in the strongest terms possible.”

**‘Morally unconscionable’**

After criticism from Summers and others, Harvard President Claudine Gay said there should be “no doubt that I condemn the terrorist atrocities perpetrated by Hamas.”

“Such inhumanity is abhorrent, whatever one’s individual views of the origins of longstanding conflicts in the region,” Gay said.

Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, dean for leadership studies at the Yale School of Management, told CNN on Wednesday that Jews have many centuries of “being blamed as victims.”

“Villains cannot be celebrated as heroes,” Sonnenfeld said in an email. “Anyone who does so cannot hide as cowards behind the shields of association titles any more than Nazi stormtroopers were allowed anonymity. Our society is founded on personal accountability.”

The Anti-Defamation League, in response to a “surge of antisemitism around the world” following the attacks on Israel, [called on CEOs on Wednesday to speak out](https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/adl-urges-corporate-ceos-sign-workplace-pledge-antisemitism-surges-globally) against hate and sign a pledge to fight antisemitism.

The ADL said signatories include Accenture, Adidas and the NBA.

“For companies that have Jewish employees, Jewish customers, Jewish investors, Jewish shareholders, or simply have a modicum of a conscience, this one should be easy,”

I’m a 40-year-old Columbia University professor and last month I found myself crying in front of dozens of strangers on campus.

I wasn’t planning on crying. The tears just came out when I spoke about the danger of antisemitism on US campuses in a [video that has since gone viral](https://twitter.com/ShaiDavidai/status/1714809243038048384). Judging from the thousands of supportive messages I’ve received, it seems that Jewish Americans around the country have been crying with me. It was a cry of despair — a howl, really — that took on the purest form of human pain. A cry that arose from the darkest, deepest and most primal of fears. A cry that has been consuming me for weeks, urging me to speak up.

Following the horrific massacre in Israel by Hamas terrorists on October 7, I felt an intense, relentless grief. Grief for the thousands of civilians shot, murdered, [mutilated, raped and beheaded](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-forensic-teams-describe-signs-torture-abuse-2023-10-15/). Grief for the intentional killing of babies, some [burned beyond recognition](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-12-23/h_4326bdad3ad54b740f850c5aca930d05). Grief for the confused children [dragged at gun point](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/08/europe/israel-hostages-hamas-what-we-know-intl/index.html) by violent men into captivity in Gaza.

Yet there was a deeper, darker grief. A grief that seeped from a wound I’d thought was healed. A grief that comes from the trauma hiding at the bottom of every Jewish person’s heart. A grief that comes from seeing, once again, Jewish people targeted in their homes and communities.

Soon, this darkest of griefs was joined by intense fear. I feared not only for the future of innocent Israeli and Palestinian children, but for the future of my family here, in New York City.

Having spent over 13 years building a close-knit community of like-minded liberals, I suddenly find myself abandoned. Abandoned by the resounding silence of friends and neighbors who refuse to publicly denounce Hamas’ evil crimes against humanity. Abandoned by colleagues who whitewash and excuse barbarities that included the raping of Israeli women and the [execution of disabled Israeli children](https://abcnews.go.com/International/israeli-child-autism-found-dead-grandmother-gaza-border/story?id=104135722) as a mere “[military response](https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2023/11/01/hundreds-of-faculty-sign-open-letters-in-debate-around-free-speech-student-safety-following-palestinian-solidarity-statement/),” who [consider such horrors](https://www.foxnews.com/media/columbia-university-professor-describes-hamas-terrorist-attacks-indigenous-palestinian-resistance) as “awesome” acts of “resistance.” Abandoned by student organizations who have welcomed and celebrated the October 7 massacre with the chant “[from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free](https://www.jns.org/columbia-barnard-students-decry-inaction-after-attack-on-all-jews/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CStudents%20chant%2C%20'From%20the,the%20New%20York%20Post%20reported.),” code words for the eradication of Jews living in Israel.

Abandoned by Columbia University — *my very own employer* — which, in the name of fostering “[different points of view](https://president.columbia.edu/news/upholding-our-values)” has allowed such expressions to take place. Its statement that “we must avoid language that vilifies, threatens, or stereotypes entire groups of people” rings hollow when it doesn’t condemn the professors and students doing exactly that.

This is happening not in Gaza. Not in Israel. Here, in the United States of America. Here, at universities, which are supposed to provide safe spaces for everyone in the community. Everyone, it seems, but Jews and Israelis.

 On the day following Hamas’ unspeakable massacre, I woke up to the most petrifying realization a parent can have: the realization that right now, all across America, there are people who see my 7-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter, both dual citizens of Israel and the US, as legitimate targets of resistance.

Were they older, I would have loved for my children to attend an incredible institution like Columbia. But not now, not under this leadership. I would be too worried for their safety. The differences between the student organizations’ chant of “from the river to the sea” and the Nazi chant of “Germany for Germans” are mere semantics. The antisemitic sentiment is the same.

It is not just these chants that keep me up at night. It is the antisemitic violence that inevitably follows when university leaders are willing to look the other way.

There is [the Israeli student who was physically attacked](https://abc7ny.com/nyc-columbia-university-israel-war/13914229/) at my workplace, Columbia University, while hanging posters of the kidnapped babies in Gaza, the Jewish students here who have been [spat on](https://ny1.com/nyc/manhattan/education/2023/10/31/jewish-students-at-columbia-university-decry-antisemitism), [cursed at](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElopAfvJDIM) and [received death threats](https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-771106). There are the online threats to rape Jewish women and throw them off a cliff and slit the throats of Jewish men on [Cornell University’s campus](https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndny/pr/cornell-student-arrested-making-online-threats-jewish-students-campus), my alma mater. ([A suspect has been arrested](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/us/cornell-university-antisemitic-threat-suspect-wednesday/index.html) and is being held in jail, with the university president saying the school would respond “rapidly and forcefully” to threats.) There are [the student organizations who, in their support of Hamas’ actions, pounded](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/nyregion/cooper-union-protest-israel-hamas.html) on the doors of a library while frightened Jewish students locked the door and sheltered inside at Cooper Union in Manhattan. There are the Jews supporting Israel who were punched and whacked at [Tulane in New Orleans](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/10/30/its-lonely-time-be-jew-america/). There is the [UC Davis professor](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-10-21/uc-davis-condemns-post-apparently-by-professsor-threatening-zionist-journalists) who threatened to attack Jewish journalists and their children, ending her social media post with emojis of a knife, a hatchet and three drops of blood. The list goes on and on.

These days, taking the subway to campus or strolling with my family through Central Park, I experience an acute and very specific anxiety: Who among my colleagues, friends and neighbors sees my children as legitimate targets? Who among my community sees the lives of my Jewish and Israeli students as expendable? How can I ever feel safe myself at a campus [whose leadership fails to condemn](https://www.jta.org/2023/10/31/ny/after-string-of-antisemitic-and-anti-israel-incidents-columbia-u-students-want-the-school-to-condemn-hamas) the rape of young women and other horrors perpetrated by Hamas on October 7.

The horrific rise of antisemitism on US campuses is a wakeup call for action. Contact every politician in your city and state. Join your PTA. Write an op-ed. Call your alma mater. File a lawsuit. We must hold accountable the leaders of institutions who, in their silence, embolden those who wish to exterminate an entire people. We must tell the heads of our universities that vacuous public relations stunts [creating antisemitism task forces](https://president.columbia.edu/news/announcing-task-force-antisemitism) are meaningless when they refuse to condemn support for terror within the campus community. We must send the world a clear message: Our lives are just as valuable as anyone else’s.

At the same time, we Jews and Israelis can – and must – stand in unity with the Palestinian people and work toward peaceful coexistence. Even in our darkest times, we must foster empathy for every person currently striving for safety and dignity. One can support a free Palestine without being antisemitic or anti-Israeli. One can fight for a sovereign Palestinian state and feel deep pain at the anguish of innocent Palestinian children while also publicly expressing a loathing of Hamas. I know, because I do. I know, because many students and faculty at Columbia have told me that they want to support the Palestinian people yet refuse to march in hate-filled protests that celebrate Hamas’ crimes.

What we cannot do is accept the existence of internationally recognized terror organizations that explicitly call for our demise. We cannot accept pro-terror student groups in the US that celebrate the atrocities committed by these organizations. We can never accept torture and murder of civilians as a legitimate act of resistance

This fear that has engulfed me is not new, of course. Every Jewish person carries it within them, regardless of whether they are Orthodox, Reform or a humanist atheist like myself. This fear is as old as the existence of the Jewish people, as old as our persecution. It is a fear that lurks in the dark basements of every Jewish mind, a basement whose door we usually don’t allow ourselves to prop open. It is a fear that Jewish children inherit from their parents and Jewish parents try to shield their child from.

Last week, crying in front of complete strangers on Columbia’s campus, it was that exact fear that howled through my throat. It was the fear of history repeating itself, the fear of the world’s apathy in the face of the largest Jewish death toll on a single day since the Holocaust. I was encompassed by the darkness of that hidden basement, crying for the world to listen: Never again is now.

As we enter 2024 what lies ahead on the global stage may seem more uncertain than it has in years.

To help you make sense of it, here are some key themes to watch.

**1. Israel-Hamas war threatens to spill over**

The new year begins with Israel pushing its offensive further into the Gaza Strip in response to Hamas’ October 7 attacks.

International pressure is mounting on Israel to limit the duration and intensity of its war amid global outcry over Gazans being trapped in mortal danger, without critical supplies or access to healthcare, as disease spreads through crowded humanitarian camps. Despite this, Israel has doubled down on its efforts and vowed its war on Hamas will rage for many months.

The risk of a wider Middle East conflict [is escalating.](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/27/politics/fears-middle-east-war-biden/index.html)

There are increasing cross-border exchanges between the Iran-backed, Islamist paramilitary group Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on the Lebanon-Israel border.

Proxy attacks by Iran-backed factions in Iraq – like the recent strike on the US embassy in Baghdad - are becoming bolder and more common. And further attacks by Yemen’s Iran-backed [Houthi rebels](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/19/middleeast/red-sea-crisis-explainer-houthi-yemen-israel-intl/index.html) on global shipping routes through the Red Sea and Suez Canal could make energy prices soar.

There’s also a risk of other extremist groups in the region being fueled by opportunism and/or grievances. It goes without saying that any formal normalization of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, a deal that appeared close before October 7, is now off the table.

The United States’ early unequivocal support of Israeli attacks on Gaza has damaged the image it projects as a guarantor of human rights and international law – a reputational hit from which Washington is unlikely to recover in the short term, despite a decisive shift in tone.

Going into 2024, the US and its allies must strike a balance between retaliation for and deterrence of proxy attacks, while keeping their responses under a threshold that would trigger a wider conflict.

Ongoing talks to reach a ceasefire agreement to halt the fighting between Hamas and Israel in Gaza by Ramadan appear to still be on track, even after [more than 100 Palestinians](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-food-truck-deaths-israel-wwk-intl/index.html) were killed on Thursday as they tried to access food in Gaza City, according to officials familiar with the discussions.

US officials on Friday said there are no indications that the discussions had been significantly derailed but much hinges on an expected Hamas response to what has been discussed in Paris and Doha in the past week between the other countries involved: Qatar, Egypt, Israel and the US. On Thursday, a Hamas official warned the negotiations could be impacted.

CNN has reached out to several Hamas officials about the potential deal but has not gotten a response.

In the immediate aftermath of the deaths of dozens of Palestinian civilians in Gaza on Thursday, US officials said the chaotic scenes injected added urgency into the hostage and ceasefire talks.

On Friday afternoon, President Joe Biden called for an “immediate ceasefire.”

“We’re trying to work out a deal between Israel and Hamas on the hostages being returned and an immediate ceasefire in Gaza for at least the next six weeks and to allow the surge of aid to the Gaza Strip,” Biden said during a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

A senior administration official said earlier Friday that the US is still racing to try to get a deal across the finish line by Ramadan – now just about a week away – which is when Israel has warned its forces would expand its military operations into Rafah in the absence of a deal.

Biden had said earlier in the week that he hoped there’d be a ceasefire in Gaza by Monday, but he offered a mixed assessment of that possibility later Friday, saying: “It looks like we’re still — it’s not there yet. I think we’ll get there, but it’s not there yet. And it may not get there now.” Asked whether a ceasefire deal may never be reached, he told reporters that he’s “still hoping for it. It’s not over ‘til it’s over.”

The president said Thursday that the deaths at the aid site could make the ceasefire talks more difficult.

Asked if he was worried the deaths would complicate negotiations, Biden responded: “Oh, I know it will.”

Biden spoke on Thursday with the leaders of Qatar and Egypt - countries playing central mediating roles in negotiations.

Technical teams have been working on the key components of a potential deal this week in Doha, officials familiar with the talks say. On Tuesday, Qatari spokesman Majed al-Ansari said disagreements remained over “numbers, ratios and [IDF] troop movements.”

It’s believed that Hamas will demand a higher ratio of Palestinian prisoners to be released by Israel if Hamas is to release female IDF soldier hostages, as demanded by Israel.

CNN Foreign Affairs analyst Barak Ravid [reported for Axios](https://www.axios.com/2024/03/01/gaza-hostage-israel-hamas-list-biden) on Friday, that as part of a Hamas response Israel expects a list of the hostages who are alive and more details on the number of Palestinian prisoners they want released, before attending more talks.

“We are hopeful that the areas of divergence between the two sides can be bridged and we can reach at least a temporary cessation of hostilities to lead to a permanent [ceasefire],” Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri said Friday, while warning that a failure to reach an agreement between Israel and Hamas before Ramadan will aggravate the Arab and Muslim world.

“Everybody has recognized the importance that we are successful in this before the beginning of Ramadan,” he told the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in Turkey.

“If this conflict was to continue into Ramadan, I think it will have a very dire consequence in that emotions will be further inflamed,” he added.

Those involved in the discussions have said an agreement would likely be implemented in multiple phases and once an initial deal is made it could lead to a truce lasting for as long as six weeks with a group of Israeli hostages released – including women, children, the elderly and sick hostages – in exchange for a smaller number of Palestinian prisoners than Hamas had initially demanded.

During a truce, negotiations would take place over more sensitive topics like the release of Israeli soldiers who are hostages, Palestinian prisoners serving longer sentences, the withdrawal of IDF forces and bringing a permanent end to the war alongside the so-called “day after” issues.

As the conflict in the Middle East reverberates around the world, many in the West have fallen into the emotional traps of anger, fear and righteousness toward the perceived other side. Exporting the conflict will not bring peace any more than it will bring victory, and the only way to reduce the flames is to learn to coexist.My work as an imam and focus on spiritual coexistence in Israel and Palestine has shown me that the best personal defense against destructive emotions is to find the other inside ourselves. A complex identity is a natural antibody that inoculates against hate, and I myself identify as a Muslim, a Bedouin, a Palestinian and an Israeli.

It is currently the month of Ramadan. This year my coexistence organization, Abrahamic Reunion, has hosted our 20th annual coexistence Iftar meal, this time in Jerusalem. It is especially meaningful to break my fast with my non-Muslim partners in the current context of the war. Ramadan is a time when Muslims have to think about the other who is less fortunate than themselves. Through fasting and charity, we are supposed to come out of the month with a renewed appreciation for our role in this world. That is the essence of spiritual coexistence, in which your self-image makes room for the humanity of others.

Many people resent that I refuse to choose only one side of my identity; they want me to be angry, empty and broken like them. Members of my own Bedouin Muslim community have threatened and attacked my family and me for simply acknowledging the humanity of Jewish Israelis. [My house was shot at](https://www.abrahamicreunion.org/ar-co-founder-bedouin-leader-khalil-albaz-takes-respite-in-us/) after I spoke out against denying the crimes of Hamas on October 7.

This is not a recent phenomenon. In 2008, after my wife was honored [with lighting a torch at a celebration of Israel’s Independence Day](https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3540753,00.html), our family’s [car was bombed](https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3541217,00.html). But these attacks have only ever strengthened my resolve to advocate for spiritual coexistence, and so I have spent years teaching Jewish Israelis about Islam and our need to recognize that both Muslims and Jews belong in this land.

This has been my life’s mission. My wife Sana and I cofounded the Abrahamic Reunion in the aftermath of the violence of the Second Intifada of the early 2000s, when terror attacks and military operations drove deep divisions between every sector of Israeli and Palestinian society. Abrahamic Reunion’s dream is to reunite the children of Abraham in the Holy Land, and to that end we have had tens of thousands of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Israelis and Palestinians join our activities over the years.

Spiritual coexistence means building bridges out of celebration, grief and the acknowledgment of God above us, no matter your faith. And it is how we cultivate the other within ourselves. Almost anyone who participates in experiences like these will find themselves more immune to the emotional pull of identity-driven hate, even amid a devastating and personal war such as this one.

Abrahamic Reunion included participants from Gaza until Hamas made participation illegal in 2013. Before then, we would sit on a hill next to the border and talk through megaphones with Gazans on the other side of the fence. Organizations that feel threatened by coexistence know that it is the greatest threat to their power.

You can always coexist with other people, but not with every ideology, and on October 7, Hamas declared war against every element of my identity. [They murdered Muslims. They kidnapped Bedouin from the desert.](https://www.jns.org/hamas-also-slaughters-muslims/) They continue to oppress Palestinians in Gaza, [stealing aid](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/12/08/elderly-gazan-accuses-hamas-stealing-aid-rare-criticism/) and using their [homes and mosque](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/07/31/why-hamas-stores-its-weapons-inside-hospitals-mosques-and-schools/)s to launch attacks. They are committed to destroying Israel and every Israeli. I am at war with Hamas because this is their path, but I will never be at war against the people of Gaza.

My religion is Islam, and as the imam of the southern Israeli town of Tel Sheva, I provide spiritual and moral guidance to my community, as my father and grandfather did before me. My ancestors are related to the Hashemite family, the traditional protectors of Islam’s holy sites.

The Islam of my tradition has nothing in common with those who proclaimed “Allahu Akbar” while inflicting unspeakable violence upon innocent civilians on October 7. It is because I am a Muslim that I call to immediately release the remaining hostages seized from Israel, [Bedouin Muslims among them](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/brother-of-bedouin-hostage-held-since-october-7-release-the-women-first/), and to provide help to Palestinians in [desperate need of humanitarian relief](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/26/middleeast/palestinians-drown-gaza-aid-drop-intl/index.html) in Gaza.

My ethnicity is Bedouin, and my people have called the Negev desert home for centuries, as nations and empires rose and fell around us. Bedouin tribes are part of the Arab fabric of this land, and I trace my history, traditions and communal codes back to the sands of the Negev. Despite being from a nomadic people, I am not at home anywhere else.

The Bedouin community in Israel has long suffered from neglect and marginalization by the state, and our society today is riddled with both crime and a lack of respect for its elders. My mission to deliver Tel Sheva back from the hands of criminals is connected to the need to return Islam from the broken souls of political extremists.

My people are the Palestinian people, and I am inextricably connected to the souls in Gaza for whom the weight of this war is unbearable. I feel their fear, hunger and suffering as my own, and I cry at the images of destruction and loss. Members of my community have family in Gaza, and we pray for their safety every day.

A solution to this conflict will only come from securing a path to Palestinian freedom, under a government that represents and cares for its people. War will not turn that hope into a reality, and neither will leaving Gaza under the moral vacuum of Hamas.

My nationality is Israeli. An Israeli who loves the country he has built alongside his Jewish and Arab neighbors. An Israeli whose wife was the first Bedouin woman honored with lighting a torch at Israel’s national Independence Day ceremony. An Israeli who knows that his country must now fight for peace as hard as it fights for survival because the two are dependent on each other. On October 7, Bedouin Muslims like myself [saved the lives of our Jewish neighbors](https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/02/14/bedouin-heroes-who-risked-lives-died-saving-others-on-oct-7-honored/), and the Israel Defense Forces defended our homes the same way they did the homes of Jewish Israelis.

My wife, may Allah have mercy on her, passed away last year. Her final instruction to me was to look after our four beautiful children and continue the journey we started together. I do so today because, beyond my identity as a Muslim, a Bedouin, a Palestinian and an Israeli, I am first and foremost a human being: a father, a husband and a servant of God

Approaching my 80th birthday, I realize that as a Jew, I’ve lived a honeymoon life. Born at the tail end of World War II, I grew up with antisemitism by and large under control, as even vicious Jew haters were reticent to attack Jews. To some extent, I believe, the world’s guilt over either its complicity or inactivity as 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust silenced the enemies of our people.This doesn’t mean anti-Semitism was not a serious problem, especially in recent decades. There were vicious antisemites and horrific antisemitic incidents that had to be condemned. The likes of Louis Farrakhan and David Duke needed to be confronted head on. Events like the 1991 murder of [Yankel Rosenbaum](https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/a-jewish-youth-is-killed-by-a-mob), a Hasidic Lubavitch scholar stabbed to death by a Jew-hating mob, brought fear into the hearts and souls of the Jewish community. Still, antisemitism was not endemic.

Eight decades after the Holocaust, however, [the Shoah](https://www.memorialdelashoah.org/en/archives-and-documentation/what-is-the-shoah.html) is in the rearview mirror. For much of the world, it is a footnote in history. Its memory no longer stymies antisemites, who were always hiding in the shadows and have now [surfaced with fury](https://www.american.edu/cas/news/antisemitism-at-new-all-time-high-in-us.cfm).

The [holiday of Purim](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-story-of-purim/), celebrated by Jews around the world this weekend, commemorates a story in the Bible’s Book of Esther when the whole of the Jewish community in ancient Persia was threatened with extinction by the King’s adviser Haman and his cohorts.

The story touches upon dimensions of antisemitism that were pungent back then, and have remained powerful and threatening across thousands of years. These forms of hatred of Jews past and present fall into three categories shaping the foundations of a nation: people, ideology and land. We have seen all of them in modern times.

During the Holocaust the goal of the Third Reich was the genocide of the Jewish people; that is, murdering Jews because they were Jews. It was the same agenda that motivated Haman two millennia ago.

During the Cold War, Soviet antisemitism came to the fore with a vengeance after the Second World War. It was based on loathing Jewish faith and ideology. Like Haman, the USSR’s leaders saw our Jewish culture and religious practices as alien to their state. Believing Judaism contrary to their [Marxist view of the world](https://www.thejc.com/news/features/the-great-marxist-lie-about-jew-hate-piib61sl), the Soviets didn’t allow Jews to live a Jewish life. Those who wished to emigrate were held as quasi-hostages behind the Iron Curtain.

Today, antisemitism is often expressed by denying that Jews have the right to be sovereign in their own land. Yet, without sovereignty, there can be no security. Jews will forever be vulnerable to the next Haman to come along. Throughout the millennia, as a stateless people, Jews were subject to persecution, discrimination and expulsion. This is a historical reality that anti-Zionists conveniently ignore when they say they are not against Jews, just against Jews having their own state.

They, and the world at large, also have no problem with having Muslim states, several of them explicitly defined as [Islamic](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/11/07/COUNTRY_FACT_SHEET_0.pdf) or [Arab](https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/egypt/10845.htm). However, the concept of one tiny Jewish state, the only Western-style democracy in the Middle East, is constantly [rejected and attacked](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/9/30/why-israel-cant-be-a-jewish-state).

Statehood is built into Jewish consciousness. Israel is more than just a place where Jews can be free and safe. As [Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/abraham-isaac-kook/), the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of pre-state Israel said: Israel is not external to Judaism but inherently part of Jewish consciousness. To wit: Jews across the religious denominations pray for the return to Zion in their daily liturgy. And religious or not, the [vast majority of Jews](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-connections-with-and-attitudes-toward-israel/) feel inextricably, soulfully bound to Israel and [describe themselves as Zionists](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/03/08/views-of-the-jewish-state-and-the-diaspora/).

So while anti-Zionists defend themselves by claiming they are not anti-Semites, when anti-Zionists declare “[no Zionists allowed](https://forward.com/forward-newsletters/looking-forward/593300/when-hate-comes-to-your-hometown-montclair-new-jersey/),” they are [actually saying](https://scholar.harvard.edu/martinkramer/publications/words-martin-luther-king), “No Jews allowed.” The fact that so many [anti-Israel](https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/pro-palestinian-protesters-enter-synagogue-during-event/) [demonstrations](https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-790868#google_vignette) are [targeting](https://www.aclumich.org/en/cases/synagogue-protesters) [Jewish](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2023-12-22/ty-article/.premium/anti-israel-protest-forces-los-angeles-shul-to-relocate-shabbat-services/0000018c-9085-d60e-afdf-f48fa7db0000) rather than Israeli institutions underscores this dynamic.

The interfacing of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism was never more apparent than on October 7. The goal of Hamas, like their antecedent Haman, goes beyond destroying Israel; its mission – as articulated in the [founding Hamas charter](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/hamas-covenant-israel-attack-war-genocide/675602/) – is to kill as many Jews as possible. Jews worldwide felt personally attacked that day, understanding that if Hamas could, each and every Jew would have been murdered.

This doesn’t mean that every anti-Zionist is an anti-Semite. There are always exceptions to a rule. But the exception doesn’t void the rule. It’s one thing to disagree, even vehemently, with some core Israeli policies. But anti-Zionism goes well beyond that to object to the very notion of Jewish self-determination, and thereby target 7 million Jews, half of the world’s Jewish population who are now living in Zion, and many thousands more who yearn to make “aliya,” or move home to Israel.

Indeed, Zionism is a play on the Hebrew word “tziun-metzuyan,” meaning a stamp of excellence. It is there in Israel that all Israelis living in a sovereign nation have the potential to do their humble share to make this world a better place

Purim is the story of a vulnerable, powerless Jewish people living in [the diaspora](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-diaspora/) threatened with physical and spiritual annihilation. Its unwritten message is the necessity for Jews to be Zionist, to live in Zion, to have a homeland wherein it is in their power to protect themselves with strength, and what Israel’s army calls the “[purity of arms](https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/our-mission-our-values/).”

According to the Book of Esther, the Jews in ancient Persia were ultimately saved by the grace of the king. But the State of Israel, with the benevolence of God, allows Jews to save themselves.

Former President [Donald Trump](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) said that [Israel](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-04-24/index.html) needs to “finish what they started” and “get it over with fast,” as he continued arguing Israel was “losing the PR war” because of the visuals coming out of Gaza.

“You’ve got to get it over with, and you have to get back to normalcy. And I’m not sure that I’m loving the way they’re doing it, because you’ve got to have victory. You have to have a victory, and it’s taking a long time,” Trump said in an interview with The Hugh Hewitt Show that aired Thursday.

Trump defended comments he made recently in an interview with Israeli newspaper Israel Hayom, in which he said Israel needed to “finish up” its war with Hamas and that the country was “losing a lot of support” among the world. One of the Israeli journalists who conducted the interview later wrote that Trump’s comments “shocked us deeply” and argued both Trump and President Joe Biden were “turning their rhetorical backs on Israel.”

“What I said very plainly is get it over with, and let’s get back to peace and stop killing people. And that’s a very simple statement. Get it over with. They’ve got to finish what they finish. They have to get it done. Get it over with, and get it over with fast, because we have to, you have to get back to normalcy and peace,” Trump told The Hugh Hewitt Show.

Trump noted, “They’ve got to finish what they started, and they’ve got to finish it fast, and we have to get on with life.”

Trump continued arguing Israel had an issue with its public messaging and said, “Israel is absolutely losing the PR war.”

“And the other thing is I hate, they put out tapes all the time. Every night, they’re releasing tapes of a building falling down. They shouldn’t be releasing tapes like that. They’re doing, that’s why they’re losing the PR war. They, Israel is absolutely losing the PR war,” Trump said.

Trump has made several public comments critical of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu amid the nation’s war with Hamas. Shortly after the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, Trump criticized Netanyahu and Israeli intelligence services for being caught unprepared by the attack and said they needed to “straighten it out.” Trump’s criticism of the US ally in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack on the nation sparked enormous backlash from both allies and adversaries.

The former president has held personal animosity toward Netanyahu ever since the prime minister publicly acknowledged Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election.

Trump has not specified how he would approach the Israel-Hamas war if reelected to the White House and how his policies would differ from Biden’s. Trump, who has been asked many times during his third presidential run about what actions he would take, only offers vague commentary while criticizing Biden and arguing the October 7 attack would not have happened if he were president.

The Israeli military has been using artificial intelligence to help identify bombing targets in Gaza, according to an investigation by [+972 Magazine and Local Call](https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/), citing six Israeli intelligence officials involved in the alleged program – who also allege that human review of the suggested targets was cursory at best.

The officials, quoted in an extensive investigation by the online publication jointly run by Palestinians and Israelis, said that the AI-based tool was called “Lavender” and was known to have a 10% error rate.

When asked about +972 Magazine’s report, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) did not dispute the existence of the tool but denied AI was being used to identify suspected terrorists. But in a lengthy statement it emphasized that “information systems are merely tools for analysts in the target identification process,” and that Israel tries to “reduce harm to civilians to the extent feasible in the operational circumstances ruling at the time of the strike.”

The IDF said “analysts must conduct independent examinations, in which they verify that the identified targets meet the relevant definitions in accordance with international law and additional restrictions stipulated in the IDF directives.”

However, one official told +972  “that human personnel often served only as a “rubber stamp” for the machine’s decisions” and typically devoted only around 20 seconds to each target – ensuring they are male – before authorizing a bombing.

The investigation comes amid intensifying international scrutiny of Israel’s military campaign, after targeted air strikes killed several foreign aid workers delivering food in the Palestinian enclave. Israel’s siege of Gaza has killed more than 32,916 people, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health, and has led to a spiraling humanitarian crisis where nearly [three-quarters](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/19/middleeast/famine-northern-gaza-starvation-ipc-report-intl-hnk/index.html) of the population in northern Gaza are suffering from catastrophic levels of hunger, according to a United Nations-backed report.

The investigation’s author, Yuval Abraham, previously told [CNN in January](https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/ampr/date/2024-01-10/segment/01) of his work looking into how the Israeli military has been ”heavily relying on artificial intelligence to generate targets for such assassinations with very little human supervision.”

The Israeli military “does not use an artificial intelligence system that identifies terrorist operatives or tries to predict whether a person is a terrorist,” the IDF statement on Wednesday said. But its analysts use a “database whose purpose is to cross-reference intelligence sources, in order to produce up-to-date layers of information on the military operatives of terrorist organizations.”

Human officers are then responsible for verifying “that the identified targets meet the relevant definitions in accordance with international law and additional restrictions stipulated in the IDF directives,” according to the IDF statement, a process also described by +972.

**Night attacks**

The magazine also reported that the Israeli army “systematically attacked” targets in their homes, usually at night when entire families were present.

“The result, as the sources testified, is that thousands of Palestinians — most of them women and children or people who were not involved in the fighting — were wiped out by Israeli airstrikes, especially during the first weeks of the war, because of the AI program’s decisions,” it wrote.

The report, citing sources, said that when alleged junior militants were targeted, “the army preferred” to use so-called dumb bombs – unguided missiles which can cause large-scale damage.

CNN reported in December that nearly [half of the 29,000](https://www.cnn.com/gaza-israel-big-bombs/index.html) air-to-surface munitions dropped on Gaza last fall were dumb bombs, which can pose a greater threat to civilians, especially in densely populated territories like Gaza.

According to the IDF statement, it does not carry out strikes where the expected collateral damage is “excessive in relation to the military advantage” and makes efforts to “reduce harm to civilians to the extent feasible in the operational circumstances.”

It added that the “IDF reviews targets before strikes and chooses the proper munition in accordance with operational and humanitarian considerations, taking into account an assessment of the relevant structural and geographical features of the target, the target’s environment, possible effects on nearby civilians, critical infrastructure in the vicinity, and more.”

Israeli officials [have long argued](https://www.cnn.com/gaza-israel-big-bombs/index.html) that heavy munitions are necessary to eliminate Hamas, whose fighters killed more than 1,200 people in Israel and took hundreds of hostages on October 7, sparking the ongoing war.

President [Joe Biden](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) offered one of his sharpest rebukes of Israel’s handling of the war in Gaza during an interview airing Tuesday, describing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s approach to the conflict as a “mistake” and calling for a halt to the fighting.

“Well, I will tell you, I think what he’s doing is a mistake. I don’t agree with his approach,” Biden told Univision, in an interview taped just days after Israeli military strikes [killed seven World Central Kitchen aid workers](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/05/middleeast/israel-world-central-kitchen-report-explainer-intl/index.html), sparking anger and frustration throughout the White House.

“I think it’s outrageous that those four, three vehicles were hit by drones and taken out on a highway where it wasn’t like it was along the shore, it wasn’t like there was a convoy moving there,” he continued, according to a Univision transcript of the interview.

It marked one of his most forceful critiques against how Netanyahu’s government is waging its war against Hamas. The president added that he’s calling for Israel to agree to a ceasefire and that there is “no excuse” for not sending in humanitarian aid.

“What I’m calling for is for the Israelis to just call for a ceasefire, allow for the next six, eight weeks total access to all food and medicine going into the country. I’ve spoken with everyone from the Saudis to the Jordanians to the Egyptians. They’re prepared to move in. They’re prepared to move this food in. And I think there’s no excuse to not provide for the medical and the food needs of those people. It should be done now,” Biden said in the interview.

The comments came in the lead up to CIA Director Bill Burns delivering a new proposal over the weekend to negotiators in Cairo as they work to secure a ceasefire and hostage deal. Speaking Tuesday, US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Hamas has not yet provided a response. Sullivan said he’d asked the prime minister of Qatar, which has acted as a mediator in the ongoing talks, to press the group for a quick response to a proposal that would secure the release of hostages.

“He does not yet have an answer from Hamas,” Sullivan said. “I pressed him to try to secure an answer from them as soon as possible.”

He said the White House had seen comments from Hamas casting doubt on an agreement on the latest proposal.

“We have seen Israel take some steps forward in terms of what they’re putting on the table. And, of course, we’ve seen the public statements from Hamas that have been, shall we say, less than encouraging,” Sullivan told reporters at the White House.

Elsewhere in the Univision interview, Biden called former President [Donald Trump](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) the biggest threat to democracy in the United States, citing his predecessor’s actions during the January 6, 2021, US Capitol riot and his calls to release from prison those involved in the attack.

Asked what constitutes “the primary threat to freedom and democracy at home,” Biden answered bluntly: “Donald Trump.”

“Donald Trump talks, uses phrases like you’re gonna – eviscerate the Constitution, he’s going to be a dictator on day one. The idea that he would sit in the office – and I’ll show you before you leave – off the Oval Office and watch for hours the attack on the Capitol, and the destruction and the mayhem and people were killed, the police officers who died, and call them political heroes, to call them patriots, and say that if he gets elected he’s going to free them all, because they’re being held illegally?” Biden said in the interview with Univision, which was taped at the White House last week.

“And think of the things he says, look at the way he talks about minority populations, Hispanics, talking about them being — anyway. It’s just, I can’t think of any other time in my lifetime, in history that’s occurred, that you’ve had somebody that had this kind of attitude,” Biden continued. “He says he’s going to be a dictator on day one? No one doesn’t believe him.”

The rare sit-down interview is set to air on the Spanish-language network Tuesday evening. Biden has sought to make issues of democracy central to his reelection campaign as he draws a contrast with Trump.

Both Trump and Biden have used the events on January 6 to make their case to voters. Trump has opened his rallies with a recording of January 6 prisoners singing the national anthem and calls the rioters “people who love our country” and “hostages unfairly imprisoned for long periods of time.”

Biden has long argued Trump’s return to the White House would amount to a grave threat to democracy, and images from January 6 opened the video announcing his reelection plans a year ago. He’s also delivered several speeches on the topic, including on the third anniversary of the Capitol riot earlier this year.

Preserving democracy was also a central theme of Biden’s 2020 campaign, and his aides have said they expect it to be a main feature of his reelection effort.

Trump has been indicted on felony charges for working to overturn the results of the 2020 election ahead of the January 6 riot. He pleaded not guilty.

In remarks at fundraisers, Biden has voiced outrage that Trump reportedly watched the January 6 attack on television from the dining room off the Oval Office, refusing aides’ entreaties to deliver a statement denouncing the violence.

He’s similarly issued warnings about Trump’s rhetoric heading into this year’s election, including comments last month about a “bloodbath” should Biden win a second term.

“Trump says if he loses again in November there will be a bloodbath. What the hell’s wrong with this guy?” Biden asked at a fundraiser in late March.