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headquarters, October 24, 2023. (Seth Wenig/AP)

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“The UN Secretary-General, who shows understanding for the campaign of mass murder of children, women, and the elderly, is not fit to lead the UN. I call on him to resign immediately,” Erdan posted on X. “There is no justification or point in talking to those who show compassion for the most terrible atrocities committed against the citizens of Israel and the Jewish people. There are simply no words.”

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Erdan said the remarks were “horrible,” and “completely disconnected from the reality in our region.”

“It’s sad that a person with such views is the head of an organization that arose after the Holocaust,” he said. “It’s really unfathomable.”

Foreign Minister Cohen, who had traveled to New York to take part in the meetings on the war, posted to X (formerly Twitter) that he was canceling a planned meeting with Guterres. After what happened on October 7, he wrote, “there is no place for an even-handed approach. Hamas needs to be wiped off the face of the earth.”

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Gantz, who recently joined the government as a member of the narrow war cabinet overseeing the war effort, also had harsh words, posting to X: “Dark are the days when the United Nations Secretary-General condones terror.”

“Absolutely nothing can justify the slaughter of innocent civilians,” he wrote. “Now is the time to stand on the right side of history, or be judged by it. Terror apologists cannot speak on behalf of the world.”

On October 7, Hamas abruptly bombarded Israel with thousands of rockets while over 2,500 gunmen breached the border with the Gaza Strip. The terrorists rampaged murderously through southern areas slaughtering those they found, butchering entire families in some communities and also killing 260 at an outdoor music festival. Some victims were mutilated, raped, and tortured. Dozens of babies were killed. Before the IDF could counter the invasion, over 220 people of all ages were abducted and dragged back to Gaza as captives. Four have since been released.

Israel has responded to the Hamas assault by vowing to destroy the terror group and launching intensive strikes in Gaza, saying it is hitting terror targets while trying to avoid civilian casualties. It has told over one million Gaza residents to evacuate the northern part of the Strip ahead of an expected ground incursion.

The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry says the strikes have killed over 5,700 Palestinians so far. Those numbers cannot be independently verified and are believed to include Hamas’s own members, as well as civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rockets.

The Security Council session brought together top diplomats including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who has previously rejected calls for a ceasefire, saying it would only allow Hamas to regroup.

Guterres said he was “deeply concerned about the clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing in Gaza. Let me be clear: No party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law.”

“The relentless bombardment of Gaza by Israeli forces, the level of civilian casualties, and the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods continue to mount and are deeply alarming,” he said.

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Noting that he had previously “condemned unequivocally the horrifying and unprecedented… acts of terror by Hamas,” Guterres called for all the hostages to be treated humanely and “released immediately and without conditions.”

Along with its military campaign, Israel has also imposed a near-total blockade of Gaza, though some humanitarian aid has been permitted to enter from Egypt in recent days under a US-brokered deal.

“But [that] is a drop of aid in an ocean of need,” Guterres said and cautioned that if Gaza runs out of fuel it will be a “disaster.”

He warned the conflict “risks spiraling throughout the region” and appealed for “an immediate humanitarian ceasefire” while urging an eventual two-state solution that would see a Palestinian state created alongside Israel.

Cohen, the foreign minister, also attended the Security Council meeting, bringing with him family members of some of those held captive in Gaza.

Addressing the forum, he warned that if the UN does not back the drive to eradicate Hamas, it will face its “darkest hour” on Guterres’s watch.

Meanwhile, the UN on Tuesday called for improved coordination among humanitarian groups to make sure the small amount of aid now moving into the Strip contained only the most needed items.

An additional challenge in a very limited flow of supplies is that we are not really receiving the most needed supplies for Gaza, or the most relevant,” UNRWA spokeswoman Tamara Alrifai said.

“In one of the shipments over the last couple of days, we received boxes of rice and lentils,” she told journalists at the UN in Geneva via video link from the Jordanian capital Amman, where UNRWA has its headquarters.

“But for people to cook lentils and rice, they need water and gas. And therefore these kinds of supplies — while very generous and well-intended — are not very usable right now,” she said.

Alrifai added that before October 7, around 500 trucks a day were entering Gaza from Israel and Egypt, with a mixture of commercial goods, food, aid and fuel.

But only a few dozen trucks carrying food, medicine, and water have entered Gaza via the southern border with Egypt since a deal entered into effect on Saturday.

“We will need to get better as a consortium of humanitarians in sending very explicit lists of what is most needed,”

### Fuel concerns

The UN has warned that more hospitals and other vital services in the Palestinian territory risked shutting down without fuel deliveries.

Israel worries that Hamas would use fuel brought into Gaza to manufacture weapons and explosives. The IDF also [said Tuesday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-gaza-photos-show-half-million-liters-of-fuel-held-by-hamas/) that Hamas is holding at least half a million liters of fuel for its military purposes, withholding it from hospitals.

Alrifai said fuel crossings into Gaza could be logistically handled by UNRWA, which was obliged to report any misuse.

“When we at UNRWA receive fuel or any other equipment, we are accountable for its handling. A couple of close donors, close countries did raise the security question… we are obligated to report to them any misuse that we see, or any risk,” she said.

Alrifai said UNRWA had in place a “very sturdy diligence system to make sure that everything we receive is only used for humanitarian purposes.”

Israel has often accused UNRWA of failing to report Hamas misdeeds, essentially enabling the terror group to operate freely within Gaza’s civilian population.

### Medical aid

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) said it had been unable to distribute any life-saving health supplies from the truck convoys to major hospitals in northern Gaza, because of a lack of security guarantees.

It said the main Al-Shifa hospital in the north now had three patients for every two beds.

“In addition to the hospitals that have had to close due to damage and attacks, six hospitals across the Gaza Strip have already shut down due to lack of fuel,” the WHO said in a statement.

Medical supplies have been delivered to four hospitals in southern Gaza and medics “took boxes of supplies off the trucks and straight into operating theaters, where doctors have been performing surgeries without anesthesia or other basic surgical supplies,” the agency said.

As the United Nations promotes an awareness campaign ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25, chilling accounts from survivors and first responders who witnessed Hamas’s October 7 massacre of 1,200 Israelis paint a horrifying picture of systemic sexual assaults perpetrated against women and girls of all ages.

One survivor of the Supernova music festival, where about 360 people were slaughtered, described how she witnessed Hamas terrorists rape an Israeli girl: “As I am hiding, I see in the corner of my eye that [a terrorist] is raping her,” the witness recounted. “They bent her over and I realized they were raping her and simply passing her on to the next [terrorist].”

Yet many feminist and women’s rights organizations worldwide have remained conspicuously silent — and some are even questioning the veracity of the accusations. These denials of the sexual abuse perpetrated by Hamas have far-reaching consequences, including the deterrence of other sexual abuse victims from seeking help.

Among others, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN-Women) released a statement on October 13 equating the Hamas brutalities with Israel’s self-defense. Likewise, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) neglected to explicitly condemn Hamas’s atrocities. And the international #MeToo movement completely failed to mention Hamas — or the Israeli victims.

On Wednesday, Israeli women’s rights experts met with UN-Women for the first time to advocate for official recognition of Hamas crimes against women and children on October 7. It marked the first meeting that the United Nations mission dedicated to upholding the rights of women and children has held with Israeli advocates since the Hamas onslaught.

Following the meeting with Israelis, the UN Security Council met in New York on “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.” There, UN-Women executive director Sima Bahous said she was “alarmed by disturbing reports of gender-based and sexual violence.” In [her speech,](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2023/11/speech-now-more-than-ever-we-must-seek-peace) which focused on the plight of women in Gaza and in the Palestinian Authority, she also condemned Hamas’s crimes inside Israel and promised they would be investigated.But Bahous’s slim acknowledgment of reports of sexual abuse is unfortunately the exception, not the rule. In one high-profile case of sexual abuse denial, on November 18 [Samantha Pearson](https://www.timesofisrael.com/university-fires-head-of-sex-assault-center-who-signed-letter-denying-oct-7-rapes/), the former director of the University of Alberta’s sexual violence center, was fired for endorsing an open letter that denied Hamas terrorists had committed rape. The letter criticized Canada’s New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh for repeating “the unverified accusation that Palestinians were guilty of sexual violence.”

Orit Sulitzeanu, executive director of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, called the failure of groups to condemn Hamas’s abuses against women a betrayal.

“The very essence of gender equality and women empowerment groups worldwide is to assist victims of such atrocities. A pregnant woman was cut open and her unborn baby was shot. How could anyone stay silent when faced with such horrific acts?”

Referring to Pearson’s signing the open letter, Sulitzeanu added that “the denial of October 7 rapes by the head of the Rape Crisis Center at the University of Alberta is unbelievable.”

“Denying the horrific sexual assaults, gang rapes, the sadistic acts of abuse of children and women is simply incomprehensible,” Sulitzeanu said. “That Pearson chose to take a political stance against the fundamental principles of working with victims — to believe in what happened, understand the difficulty of coming forward and testifying, and acknowledge that the ability to speak up is a time-consuming process — is disheartening.”

On Wednesday, Israeli First Lady Michal Herzog published [an opinion piece in Newsweek](https://www.newsweek.com/silence-international-bodies-over-hamas-mass-rapes-betrayal-all-women-opinion-1845783) expressing outrage and betrayal over the international community’s failure to condemn the gender-based sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas on October 7.

“A Hamas video from a kibbutz shows terrorists torturing a pregnant woman and removing her fetus. Our forensic scientists have found bodies of women and girls raped with such violence that their pelvic bones were broken,”

Those of us unlucky enough to have seen video evidence broadcast by the terrorists themselves witnessed the body of a naked woman paraded through Gaza, and another, still alive, in bloodied pants held captive at gunpoint being pulled into a jeep by her hair. This evidence, along with the explicit recorded confessions of captured terrorists, makes abundantly clear that mass rape was a premeditated part of Hamas’s plan,”A large number of women and children are among the 240 hostages held by the Hamas terror group in the Gaza Strip, Herzog wrote, adding that “only when they are released will we know what they have endured.”

Herzog slammed international bodies for failing to speak out.

Collecting physical evidence of sexual assault has been difficult because the area in which the massacres took place remained an active war zone for days, and rape kits must be collected within a 48-hour window. In addition, many of the rape victims’ dead bodies were too badly disfigured to make the collection of physical evidence possible.

Despite these challenges, Israel Police is in the process of investigating and [building several sexual assault cases](https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-start-building-oct-7-rape-cases-focusing-on-footage-and-testimonies/) against Hamas terrorists with the intent of prosecuting them. Authorities confirmed they had retrieved video evidence, photographs of victims’ bodies and testimony from terrorists confirming witness accounts of sexual assault.

Israel recently [posted on its official X account](https://twitter.com/Israel/status/1723759157960953981) (formerly Twitter): “On Nov. 2, an Arabic-Hebrew transliteration glossary belonging to Hamas was discovered in Israel with sexual terminology, including ‘take your pants off.’ This evidence suggests that Hamas terrorists planned to systematically rape Israeli women.”

### A deliberate choice not to stand with Israeli women

The UN-Women’s [campaign](https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/1724759213287563733) for November 25 urges governments worldwide to share how they are acting to end gender-based violence. But that organization’s October 13 statement didn’t name Hamas or its crimes against humanity, and read simply: “UN-Women condemns the attacks on civilians in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

Until Wednesday, Bahous — previously a Jordanian diplomat before becoming UN-Women’s executive director — similarly made no mention of the massacre or targeting of Israeli women, including in an October 8 [tweet](https://twitter.com/unwomenchief/status/1710833472095269002), but had repeatedly attacked Israel for its campaign to remove Hamas from power, including with a November 3 [tweet](https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/1720206701654065328) reading: “We condemn the strikes on #Jabalia refugee camp, all refugee camps and civilian infrastructure. The continuous bombardment has caused devastating destruction and loss of lives, leaving nowhere safe for the people of #Gaza, including women & children.”

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also failed to explicitly condemn Hamas’s atrocities, despite having previously denounced Islamic State’s systematic attacks and sexual violence against Yazidi women in Iraq, Boko Haram’s violence against Nigerian women and the targeting of Rohingya women and girls in Myanmar.

When contacted by The Times of Israel, CEDAW confirmed that it “did not as such adopt a statement on the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023.”

But while CEDAW didn’t have a statement condemning the Hamas rapes, it did have a list of obligations for Israel’s continued participation in the CEDAW Convention — including that it come up with a comprehensive strategy to deal with those rapes.

Countries that have ratified the CEDAW Convention are required to submit a report every four years on progress made in removing obstacles to equality. This year, Israel is required to submit one of these reports, its seventh since ratifying the Convention.

Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, a former vice president of CEDAW, told The Times of Israel that she submitted a request to the group to add as an item for discussion Hamas’s massacre during an already scheduled meeting on October 9.

CEDAW ignored the request for three weeks before releasing a statement in which the committee condemned “the escalating violence in the Middle East that has killed thousands of civilians, including women and children.”

Said Halperin-Kaddari: “CEDAW is the most important women’s rights international body that signals the direction in which women’s rights should be developed. It sets standards for the whole world in terms of international women’s rights.

“It doesn’t matter that Hamas is a non-state actor, it is obligated to abide by international human rights law.

“ Regardless, CEDAW has condemned non-state actors in the past,” she said.

### The #MeToo movement turns its back on Israelis

When initially asked by The Times of Israel about the group’s position on the October 7 atrocities, a development associate with the #MeToo movement said a statement would be forthcoming.

The statement, released November 13, makes no mention of Israel, Israeli women or Hamas.

“What we have been witnessing in Gaza is a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of people have been killed, injured, displaced, or deprived of basic human necessities like water, food, and medical care,” reads the statement.

It continues: “As a global movement rooted in Black feminism, and driven by principles of anti-violence and anti-patriarchy, me too. International recognizes that sexual violence often functions as a weapon of war and imperialism. Sexual violence has been used in many periods of war, as a tactic to intimidate and punish innocent civilians, and as a tool of genocide and ethnic cleansing, aimed at destroying communities. Conflict-related sexual violence is acknowledged as a war crime under international law but accountability and justice for survivors under the law remains difficult to enforce.”

The group issued [a follow-up statement](https://metoomvmt.org/stay-informed/press/me-too-international-calls-for-a-ceasefire/) on November 15 clarifying that it stands by Israeli women, as well.

Other NGOs have similarly singled Israel out for censure or avoided condemning Hamas’s war crimes.

Women Deliver, a global group advocating for gender equality and women’s rights, also failed to condemn the October 7 massacre, but [tweeted](https://twitter.com/MalihaKhanWD/status/1716924127955845587) about “the risk of genocide against the Palestinian people” and issued a single statement “condemning the ongoing war crimes in Gaza.”

Additionally, the group Equality Now refrained from mentioning Hamas by name, referring The Times of Israel to an October 23 statement in which the organization expressed a commitment to “identify violations of international and humanitarian law, drawing attention to the specific impact on all women and children,” and to provide “recommendations for action to governments and international human rights bodies to hold perpetrators of violence to account.”

The organization was not able to expand on how or when it planned to spearhead such an effort in relation to Hamas’s attacks.

Meanwhile, Time’s Up, which supports and promotes awareness of victims of sexual harassment, did not respond to repeated requests for comment, and SOS Children’s Villages, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt’s foundation, which supports families and children affected by conflicts, referred The Times of Israel to four statements on the Israel-Hamas war.

Three of them focused on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and called for an immediate ceasefire, whereas the other called for the “immediate protection of children and their rights in the Gaza Strip and Israel,” without making mention of Hamas’s crimes.

### Breaking the silence

Some groups have bucked the trend that appears to be dominating human rights organizations.

Belkis Wille, an associate director with the Crisis and Conflict division at Human Rights Watch, said the group sent a team to Israel to conduct an in-depth investigation into sexual crimes and abuses by Hamas terrorists on October 7.

“My colleague and I arrived a few days after the [Hamas] attacks. We’ve spoken to dozens of witnesses and survivors and are analyzing hundreds of videos and photos of the events,” said Wille, who took part in the field investigation.

Wille told The Times of Israel that it would take several weeks for the report to be compiled and published, and even longer to conduct an internal review and analysis of photo and video evidence. Investigators are also planning to use forensics to match evidence to testimonies. European Parliament President Roberta Metsola also condemned the attacks at the European Council, saying that on October 7, “the world awoke to the worst terrorist attack on families in Israel in generations.”

Hamas’s “mass murder, kidnappings, rapes, torture, mutilations and desecration of the dead” cannot be ignored, she added.

Metsola spokesperson Jüri Laas told The Times of Israel that “the president wanted EU institutions and all political groups to express our solidarity following the very disturbing events. She wanted to show our strong and united stand against terrorism.”

And in response to the international #MeToo movement’s failure to condemn the sexual abuse perpetrated by Hamas, the grassroots awareness campaign #MeToo\_UNless\_UR\_a\_Jew was created by Danielle Ofek, co-founder and CEO of P51, a social impact venture that advocates for equal opportunities for women in the workplace, and Nataly Livski, senior marketing and business development marketer at Deloitte.

The website and corresponding Instagram account include a petition to denounce UN-Women’s repeated failure “to address the current situation impartially while actively and knowingly working to create a false and insidious narrative.”

### Far-reaching consequences

Sulitzeanu said that she knew of October 7 survivors who were raped but were not yet ready to talk. If the outside world remained silent, she said, these victims would be less likely to do so and therefore continue suffering alone.

Sulitzeanu also invoked Shani Louk, whose lifeless and naked body was paraded around and desecrated in the streets of Gaza, as well as other young women who were raped and mutilated.

“There was a desire to shame the nation and contaminate Israeli women,” she said.

Dr. Cochav Elkayam, chair of the Civil Commission on the October 7 Crimes by Hamas Against Women and Children, described a harrowing incident in which “two teenage girls shot in the head were found with their pants pulled down, vaginal bleeding and sperm specimen all over them.”

Elkayam, an international law expert who founded Reichman University’s Dvora Institute for Gender and Sustainability, also related the testimony of a 94-year-old who witnessed her granddaughter being sexually abused and then brutally killed.

Maytal Kuperard, the spokesperson for Jewish Women’s Aid, a UK-based group that supports Jewish women and children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence, told The Times of Israel that victims have been deterred from seeking help.

“The public silence from many UK domestic/sexual abuse sector organisations further impacts the isolation and the fear our clients are experiencing,” read an October 25 statement from the group. Kuperard added that since October 7, women in abusive relationships in the UK were choosing to stay in their toxic environments.

To combat this, Tal Hochman,  government relations officer at the Israel Women’s Network, which promotes gender equality in Israel, started a petition supported by over 140 organizations demanding condemnation by all UN bodies of the crimes committed against women on October 7.

Hochman told The Times of Israel that UN organizations’ inertia could encourage Hamas to perpetrate further sexual crimes against the roughly 240 hostages being held in Gaza.

“UN Resolution 1325 specifies that women and children should receive special protection in times of conflict or in captivity. We need our feminist and human rights allies to condemn those crimes and push for the release of women and children held in Gaza,” said Hochman.

She explained that clear condemnation might have prompted the UN to send task forces to Israel to help document the gender-based violence, collect evidence and help treat the victims.

Elkayam, of the Civil Commission gathering evidence of Hamas’s sexual abuse, reiterated the betrayal she says all women felt from UN bodies’ failure to condemn Hamas’s crimes against women and young girls.

“Their silence is deafening,” Elyakam said. “History will judge their inability to express solidarity with victims of these despicable crimes in a country that suffered its worst attack since the Holocaust.”

Israel formally declared a state of war on Sunday as the death toll from an unprecedented Hamas attack a day earlier rose above 700 and was expected to rise further, with the fate of over a hundred people abducted and taken to the Gaza Strip still unclear. On Monday afternoon, the toll was updated to 800.

The Government Press Office, a body that operates under the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, said that the number of hostages in Gaza was at over 100. Hamas and Islamic Jihad boasted Sunday night that they were holding some 130 Israeli hostages, claiming this included high-ranking army officials.

Israeli jets carried out “intense” airstrikes on targets in Gaza on Sunday afternoon, shortly after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office announced that the security cabinet had voted Saturday evening to put the country officially at war, meaning it can carry out “significant military activities.”

Battles were ongoing Sunday in at least three communities near the Gaza border overrun by Hamas gunmen a day earlier, and rocket fire continued to dog Israeli communities, as Israel girded for what was expected to be a prolonged campaign against the Gaza-based terror group.

In an assault of shocking breadth, Hamas gunmen rolled into as many as 22 locations in southern Israel on Saturday morning, including towns and smaller communities as far as 15 miles (24 kilometers) from the Gaza border. In some places, they roamed for hours, gunning down civilians and soldiers as Israel’s military scrambled to muster a response. At the same time, thousands of rockets were fired at towns in the south and center.

The scenes of chaos and suffering and the prolonged failure to gain control of the situation have shocked and outraged the nation, and sparked demands for answers on the many failures of intelligence, deployment, and policy that had enabled such a national catastrophe, with hundreds of terrorists flooding civilian communities in armed convoys.

Officials estimated Sunday that over 700 people were killed in the massive assault launched by Hamas terrorists in Israeli communities near Gaza and by the thousands of rockets fired into Israel, making it the bloodiest day in the nation’s history, according to reports.

A spokesperson for ZAKA, a volunteer group that handles human remains after terror attacks and other disasters, told Hebrew media that the death toll rose sharply, as Israeli teams managed to clear Hamas gunmen out of communities along the border and recover victims.

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Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer told CNN in an interview Sunday that the death toll was “well north of 600 people,” adding: “There will probably be more hundreds, several hundred more.”

The Health Ministry said that the number of wounded in hospitals had reached 2,243, including 22 in critical condition and 343 seriously wounded.

The liberation of communities and other areas from Hamas control revealed shocking scenes of streets, fields and highways littered with bodies, abandoned vehicles and personal belongings, with many people having been slain in their own homes.

Reut Karp shared on Facebook an alarming testimony from her children about the murder of their father, Dvir Karp, and his partner Stav in Kibbutz Re’im.

“At 8:20 a.m., terrorists entered Dvir’s home, he lunged at them with an axe, tried to protect my two kids who were with him, and was murdered in front of their eyes,” she posted. “His partner Stav also tried to protect them, but was murdered as well. The terrorist calmed down my Daria and Lavi, covered them in a blanket, took lipstick and wrote on the wall: ‘The al-Qassam [Brigades] people don’t murder children.’

“For three hours, I was on the phone with Daria, calming her down, hearing her breathe heavily and in fear. She was hearing someone still inside the house and I instructed her to be silent,” said Reut Karp, who lives in Yehud. Eventually, she said, an armed civilian found and rescued the kids through the window — to avoid passing by the bodies — and took them to a safe home where they were still besieged and unable to leave the kibbutz as of Sunday.

Mor Bayder shared the story of the brutal murder of her grandmother in Kibbutz Nir Oz.

“My grandmother, my whole world, who lit up my life, a rock to me and my family, a resident of Nir Oz all her life, was viciously murdered yesterday by a terrorist in her home,” Bayder wrote on Facebook. “At 7 a.m., I saw the nightmare of my life. A terrorist broke into her home, murdered her, took her phone, photographed the horror, and posted it on her Facebook account. That’s how we found out.”

In some cases, the Hamas terrorists set buildings on fire in Nir Oz to flush out families from their hideouts, then proceeding to shoot or kidnap them.

In addition to those killed and injured, Hamas gunmen took an unknown number of civilians and soldiers captive into Gaza after overrunning several military bases and communities.

Social media was filled with horrifying videos of men, women and children being carried into the Strip, many of them appearing to have been abused. There were also videos published of dead Israelis taken, including soldiers, the bodies of some of whom were paraded in the streets.

The Israel Defense Forces said Sunday it had established a situation room to focus on putting together accurate information regarding the Israeli hostages held by the Hamas terror group in the Gaza Strip.

The IDF said the team will compile a “situational picture” for locating the captives, both soldiers and civilians.

“Amid all the complexity and uncertainty, it is necessary to issue reliable messages as quickly as possible. Some families have already received messages about their loved ones,” the IDF said.

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Police and the IDF Home Front Command have also established a situation room to identify those killed in the attacks using DNA samples provided by families.

A long line of Israelis with missing relatives snaked outside a police station in central Israel to supply investigators with DNA samples and other means that could help identify their family members.

Writing on X, Opposition Chief Yair Lapid called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to immediately appoint a coordinator for missing and captive Israelis “so that there will be someone to work with the families.”

Shortly after, Netanyahu appointed Gal Hirsch, a reservist brigadier-general who commanded the 91st Division in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, as the government’s point man on missing and kidnapped citizens.

Among the kidnapped were small children, the elderly, and foreign nationals including 11 Thais working on farms near the border. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the State Department was attempting to confirm reports that Americans had been killed or kidnapped.

In Israel, a woman posted a heartfelt plea on social media with a photograph of her 85-year-old grandmother in the hands of Hamas terrorists in Gaza

“This is my grandmother, she was captured and taken to Gaza,” wrote Adva Adar on social media. “Her name is Yaffa Adar and she is 85!!”“My grandmother established the kibbutz with her own hands, believed in Zionism, in this country that has abandoned her, a hostage,” she wrote. “She is apparently thrown somewhere, suffering from severe pain, without medication, without food and without water, dying of fear, alone.

“And no one is talking to us, no one can tell us anything.”

The call echoed the [pleas from the families of those missing](https://www.timesofisrael.com/relatives-of-dozens-killed-or-kidnapped-to-gaza-from-rave-nobody-is-helping-us/), many of whom say they have been [abandoned](https://www.timesofisrael.com/residents-near-gaza-strip-beg-for-idf-help-as-they-fight-off-terrorists/) by the authorities.

Desperate mother Alin Atias was looking for her daughter Amit Buskila.

“Nobody is helping us,” she said. “Where is the government?”

“I beg the whole country. Help me find my daughter,” she cried. “Benjamin Netanyahu, I am begging you, send helicopters. Find her, I beg you, please.”

Ella Ben Ami said that she believes her father has been kidnapped into Gaza after seeing a photo of him on social media being taken, and has no idea where her mother is.

“We just keep watching the news all day hoping for news,” she said. “It’s horrible, it’s a horrible thought, that we are only finding out information from the news.”

An Egyptian official said Israel had sought help from Cairo to ensure the safety of the hostages, and that Egypt’s intelligence chief had contacted Hamas and the smaller but more radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad group, which also took part in the incursion, to seek information. Egypt has often mediated between the two sides in the past.

However, both Israel and Hamas denied that talks over the hostages were taking place.

“Right now, we are fighting terrorists on Israeli territory. We’re not involved in any talks about the hostages right now,” There were still Hamas terrorists in Israel, and Israeli troops were working to find them and kill them, he said.

“We will purify the area and attack terrorists wherever they are,” he said. “Hamas has inflicted a great disaster on the residents of the Gaza Strip. There will be a time for hard questions and tough investigation, but now we are at war and are busy attacking the enemy and winning.”

The existence of Israeli hostages in Gaza likely complicated Israeli plans for a widescale counterassault on Gaza. Nonetheless, Israeli jets pounded Hamas and Islamic Jihad positions throughout the Strip, intensifying its air campaign a day after Netanyahu vowed to “avenge this black day.”

Sites targeted by Israeli Air Force fighter jets and drones included headquarters used by the terror groups to manage the fighting.

The Israeli Navy also foiled attempts by terrorists to infiltrate into Israel via the sea, killing dozens of terrorists.

The Hamas-run health ministry in the Gaza Strip said 370 Palestinians have been killed and another 2,200 have been wounded in the Gaza Strip. Most of those were apparently killed in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israel’s retaliatory strikes.

The IDF has said that it has killed more than 400 Palestinian terrorists, both in Israel and in strikes in Gaza.

But inside Israel, security forces were still struggling to clear terrorist cells entrenched within devastated communities over 36 hours after the coordinated assault began. There were reports of heavy gun battles between Israeli troops and Palestinian terrorists in the southern town of Magen, close to the border with the Gaza Strip.

According to Hebrew-language media, the Israel Defense Forces also used tanks against the terrorists in the area.

Additionally, gunfights were continuing in Kfar Aza, where there were reports of at least 10 terrorists still holed up.

The military said it was evacuating civilians from towns adjacent to the border with the Gaza Strip, while searching the area for any terrorists who may still be in Israeli territory.

The towns include Nahal Oz, Erez, Nir Am, Mefalsim, Kfar Aza, Gevim, Or Haner, Ibim, Netiv Ha’asara, Yad Mordechai, Karmia, Zikim, Kerem Shalom, Kissufim, Holit, Sufa, Nirim, Nir Oz, Ein Hashlosha, Nir Yitzhak, Be’eri, Magen, Re’im, Sa’ad, and Alumim.

“Further evacuations will be carried out according to the assessment of the situation,” the IDF said.

Many civilians were still holed up in their homes, hiding in fear of roving terrorists searching for victims.

All known hostage situations, which saw Israeli civilians held captive by Hamas gunmen in their towns, were resolved overnight, with army and police forces killing terrorists and rescuing their captives after hours-long standoffs in Sderot, Ofakim, and [Kibbutz Be’eri](https://www.timesofisrael.com/kibbutz-beeri-bloodbath-reminds-israelis-of-fears-and-fortitudes-from-1948/).

But fears that terrorists could still be roaming free throughout the country remained rampant, keeping much of the country on edge.

Police said they “neutralized” a car with Palestinian terrorists on the Route 4 highway as it sped northward from Gaza, before veering off into a field close to Ashkelon. But later reports indicated that the driver had been an Israeli and the chase a tragic case of mistaken identity.

In Sderot, where terrorists managed to overrun a police station Saturday, a resident riding an all-terrain vehicle was shot and wounded by Israeli forces after refusing to halt, the municipality said.

Additionally, there was sporadic rocket fire throughout the day, mainly toward communities in the south, in contrast to barrages a day earlier, which targeted areas as far away as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Four people were wounded, one of them critically, in a rocket barrage toward the Sderot area. The municipality said at least six buildings were hit, while the Sdot Negev Regional Council ordered residents to remain in shelters until further notice.

On Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, the Hezbollah terror group shelled Israeli positions, drawing Israeli counterstrikes and sparking worries of a second front opening in the war.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant ordered the IDF’s Home Front Command to put together plans for a possible evacuation of towns on Israel’s northern border as well, should fighting break out on that front too.

The military was engaged in a mass call-up of reserves soldiers amid preparations for what leaders promised would be an unprecedented military response, with many forces diverted toward the south and also in the north.

Israel was receiving broad support from Western governments and leaders, many of whom condemned the Hamas assault and the targeting and systematic abduction of civilians.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators on Sunday in New York celebrated Hamas’s massive deadly terror attack against Israel, as supporters of the Jewish state held rallies to mourn and express outrage over the slaughter.

Several hundred pro-Palestinian demonstrators rallied in Times Square, waving Palestinian flags and chanting “Resistance is justified,” “Globalize the intifada,” and “Smash the settler Zionist state.”

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,”

* [1](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [2](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [3](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [4](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [**5**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [6](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [7](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [8](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)

NEW YORK — Pro-Palestinian demonstrators on Sunday in New York celebrated Hamas’s massive deadly terror attack against Israel, as supporters of the Jewish state held rallies to mourn and express outrage over the slaughter.

Several hundred pro-Palestinian demonstrators rallied in Times Square, waving Palestinian flags and chanting “Resistance is justified,” “Globalize the intifada,” and “Smash the settler Zionist state.”

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,”  Several dozen pro-Israel demonstrators, including many Israelis, gathered across the street. They sang Israel’s anthem, “Hatikvah,” bearing Israeli flags, and chanted “Shame” and “Murderers.”

Tensions ran high, with the Israeli group chanting “The people of Israel live” in Hebrew, and the pro-Palestinian group shouting back “free Palestine.” Some made mock crying gestures toward the Israelis to taunt them. The whole world should know there was a massacre in Israel. That’s why I’m here,” said Israeli demonstrator Tanya Farhi-Altman.

“In their place, I would be very ashamed to show my face here today, after yesterday they murdered so many of our children, the elderly, women and helpless people,” she said of the pro-Palestinian activists. “I would be ashamed and stay home. I would also say ‘I’m sorry.'”

This is not a protest, this is a vigil,” said Israel supporter Hannah Simpson. “We’re in a state of mourning, shock, panic and outright fear for the days ahead that are going to get bloodier.”

“We mourn the death of our own and the death of the Palestinians who are going to be collateral damage in what it takes to eliminate this threat to Israel’s sovereignty and security,” she said.

At a second rally across from the UN Headquarters, several hundred Israelis and US Jews gathered for a somber event to mourn and express solidarity.

The crowd sang “Hatikvah” and traditional songs, and chanted “Never again” and “No fear here.” Some in the crowd cried; others carried photos of terror victims.

“It’s heartbreaking, it’s horrifying, but also now Israelis of all different backgrounds, regardless of any differences in opinions or about anything, are obviously coming together as Israelis and Jews always do in times of crisis,” Michael Perlman said. “I think people feel good to be together during this time, that’s really important, and to know that we have each other here in America and we have the back of Israel.”

The pro-Palestinian demonstrators from Times Square marched across Manhattan to a street corner near the Israeli group, and the two sides squared off on opposite sides of a two-lane street. Hundreds of police and metal barricades separated the groups as helicopters and a drone hovered overhead.

New York protests during previous rounds of Gaza violence saw some fighting between the opposing sides, and violent [hate crimes](https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-plead-guilty-to-hate-crime-charges-for-2021-attack-on-jewish-man-in-nyc/) against Jews. Jewish security officials and the state leadership have said there are no known threats to Jewish communities, but police have stepped up protection of Jewish sites.

Among the pro-Palestinian side, the mood was celebratory and spiteful. Demonstrators chanted “700,” apparently referring to the confirmed number of Israeli fatalities in the attack so far, and held up the number seven on their hands while making throat-slitting gestures. Others flashed victory signs with their hands while shouting insults.

One man held up a picture of an Israeli hostage on his phone and waved it at the Israeli crowd. Another was seen brandishing [an image of a swastika](https://twitter.com/IsraelinNewYork/status/1711140059162849570). Some taunted the Israelis while tearing up and stomping on an Israeli flag, or danced with a Palestinian flag.

“The oppressed people of Palestine broke out of the open-air prison,” one speaker told the crowd, to cheers. “The White House is telling all of its mouthpieces to tell us a false story, but we know that the real terrorist is the Israeli state.”

The Israeli crowd chanted “Terrorists,” “Murderers,” “Shame on you,” and “Bring them home,” referring to the dozens of hostages taken by the Gaza terrorists.

The pro-Palestinian rally was organized by activist groups that call for Israel’s destruction and the ostracization of Zionists at regular [street protests](https://www.timesofisrael.com/intifada-until-victory-pro-palestinian-demonstrators-rally-in-new-york/) in the city. Some of the groups are affiliated with student organizations at the City University of New York (CUNY), the city’s massive public university system that Jewish groups have accused of [allowing campus antisemitism](https://www.timesofisrael.com/nycs-public-law-school-releases-video-of-antisemitic-commencement-speech/). Several CUNY student groups backed Sunday’s pro-Palestinian rally, and another scheduled for Monday at the Israeli consulate.

CUNY’s chancellor [said](https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2023/10/07/statement-from-cuny-chancellor-felix-v-matos-rodriguez/) on Saturday that he was “horrified by Hamas’ surprise attack on Israel and its people.”

The pro-Palestinian protest drew harsh criticism from Jewish groups and the state leadership. Governor Kathy Hochul called it “abhorrent and morally repugnant”; Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine said it was “outrageous”; and US Rep. Ritchie Torres of New York said it was “glorifying terrorism.”

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The American Jewish Committee said, “Anyone supporting Hamas’s assault on Israel is supporting their war crimes, slaughter, and kidnapping.”

“These protestors openly cheer for atrocities. They’re not pro-Palestinian; they’re pro-bloodshed,” the Israeli Consulate in New York said.

US Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York said, “I can’t think of anything more ill-timed and cold-hearted than today’s demonstration in Times Square.”

The protest was also supported by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) political party. The New York branch of the party advertised the event and expressed “solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right to resist.” In response to criticism, the national chapter of DSA doubled down, saying the Hamas attack was “not unprovoked,” adding, “Take to the streets to join a protest.”

Why does [DSA] support Hamas when it murders Israeli civilians? Why do people only excuse terror when it targets Israel?” the American Jewish Committee said.

“The NYC-DSA is revealing itself for what it truly is — a deep rot of antisemitism that must be universally condemned for celebrating the deadly terrorist attacks against Israel,” Torres said.

Members of the US Congress affiliated with the party, some of whom have condemned the Hamas attack, did not respond to requests for comment on Sunday.

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In Atlanta, more than 75 people demonstrated at the Israeli consulate Sunday afternoon, chanting slogans in support of Hamas and calling for an end to US aid to Israel.

“Yesterday was inevitable,” said Anne Belocura, a member of the Party for Socialism and Liberation. She said that the policies of Israel “precipitated an inevitable counteroffensive by Palestinian resistance forces.”

Talia Segal, a student at nearby Georgia Tech, came as a counter-protester, carrying an Israeli flag fringed with the rainbow of the LGBTQ+ pride movement.

“Terrorism is never justified. Their target was Israeli civilians,” said Segal, who is Jewish and said she fears for her family in Israel.

In Chicago, Priscilla Reed was among hundreds of pro-Palestinian demonstrators who rallied outside the Israeli consulate. Many waved Palestinian flags or wore keffiyeh, the black and white checkered scarfs that have come to symbolize Palestinian solidarity. Their chants, in both English and Arabic, included, “Netanyahu you will see, Palestine will be free!”

Reed, a retired teacher, said the attacks by Hamas were in response to Israel’s “systemic daily violence against Palestinians.”

Other pro-Palestinian rallies, many lauding “the resistance,” were set to take place around the US and in other countries over the weekend and in the coming days.

Jewish groups have also scheduled solidarity events and efforts to assist Israel, and Israelis in the US.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel “is at war” after Hamas launched a devastating [surprise attack](https://www.timesofisrael.com/incoming-rocket-sirens-sound-across-southern-central-israel/) on the country on Saturday, and vowed to exact an “unprecedented price” from the terror group.

“Citizens of Israel, we are at war. Not an operation, not a round [of fighting,] at war! This morning Hamas initiated a murderous surprise attack against the state of Israel and its citizens,” Netanyahu said in his filmed statement in Hebrew.

The statement, which appeared to have been filmed at the Israel Defense Forces headquarters in Tel Aviv, was posted at around 11 a.m., several hours into the fighting that erupted after Hamas fired thousands of rockets into Israel and hundreds of gunmen crossed the border with the Gaza Strip and invaded multiple Israeli towns and communities.

At least 200 Israelis were confirmed killed and over 1,400 wounded by evening. Additional casualties were reported from the Gaza border communities, where gun battles still raged between the IDF and terrorists who were seen roaming freely in several places.

“We have been in this since the early morning hours. I have convened the heads of the defense establishment. I’ve given directives, first and foremost, to clear the [affected] urban areas of the terrorists who penetrated them,” Netanyahu said. “This is happening right now.”

In parallel, I am initiating an extensive mobilization of the reserves to fight back on a scale and intensity that the enemy has so far not experienced. The enemy will pay an unprecedented price,I urge the public to follow strictly the directives of the military, the Home Front Command. We are at war and will win,” Netanyahu said.

Throughout Saturday, the IDF said it struck multiple terrorist squads in southern Israel, as well as several sites belonging to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The sites targeted by Israeli Air Force fighter jets and drones included 17 military compounds, four headquarters, and two high-rise towers the IDF said were used to house Hamas assets.

The military said it notified residents of the two buildings before they were hit.

IAF fighter jets dropped more than 16 tons of munitions on Hamas assets in the Strip, according to a military source.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also vowed that Israel “will win this war.”

“Hamas made a grave mistake this morning and started a war against the State of Israel. IDF soldiers are fighting the enemy at all the infiltration sites,” Gallant said in remarks provided by his office.

“The State of Israel will win this war,” he added.

“It is necessary to mobilize the international community against terrorism,” the statement continued, ending with strong support for the citizens of Israel, active and reserve IDF soldiers all security and emergency forces.

“We call on all citizens — obey the directives of the Home Front Command, take care of yourselves and together we will overcome terrorism,” said the statement.

Organizers of protests against the government’s judicial overhaul scheduled for Saturday night announced the cancellation of the weekly demonstrations.

“We stand with the residents of Israel and give full support to the IDF and the security forces,” the protest organizers said in a statement.

“We call on all those who are needed to report [for duty] and play their part to safeguard the security and health of of the residents of Israel.” The Brothers and Sisters in Arms protest group also urges all those who are needed to report for duty “without hesitation.”

A joint statement from Knesset opposition party heads gave full backing to the IDF and called on the international community to condemn the acts of terror.

Yesh Atid head Yair Lapid, National Unity head Benny Gantz, Yisrael Beitenu head Avigdor Lieberman and Labor party head Merav Michaeli said, “In days like these there is no opposition and no coalition in Israel.”

We “are united in the face of terrorism” and the need to strike with “a strong and determined fist,” said the statement, calling for retribution against Hamas and all terrorist organizations that cooperate with it.

Hundreds of reservists had previously refused to report for duty so long as the government pursued its controversial reform.

President Isaac Herzog also called for solidarity.

“The State of Israel is at a difficult moment. I am wishing much strength to the IDF, its commanders and fighters and the entirety of the security and rescue forces,” Herzog wrote on X.

“I wish to encourage and strengthen all in Israel who are under attack. I urge everyone to follow the instructions of the Home Front Command, and demonstrate mutual solidarity and calm. Together we will triumph over those who wish to harm us

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Tuesday that the Israel Defense Forces is moving to a “full offense” against the Gaza Strip, as sporadic clashes with Hamas terrorists in southern Israel continued for the fourth day.

“I have released all the restraints, we have [regained] control of the area, and we are moving to a full offense,” Gallant said in an address to troops along the Gaza border.

“You will have the ability to change the reality here. You have seen the prices [being paid], and you will get to see the change. Hamas wanted a change in Gaza; it will change 180 degrees from what it thought,”

Ministry)

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“You will have the ability to change the reality here. You have seen the prices [being paid], and you will get to see the change. Hamas wanted a change in Gaza; it will change 180 degrees from what it thought,” he said. “They will regret this moment, Gaza will never go back to what it was,” Gallant continued. “Whoever comes to decapitate, murder women, Holocaust survivors, we will eliminate him with all our might, and without compromise.”

An Egyptian official told The Times of Israel on Tuesday that Cairo has been informed by Israel that it is readying for a monthslong ground campaign in Gaza

“we will return here, to Be’eri, in a few months, and the situation will be different. We will resettle the kibbutz until its last meter.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly told US President Joe Biden on Monday that Israel has no choice but to launch a ground operation against Hamas in Gaza.

We have to go in. We can’t negotiate now,” Netanyahu was quoted as saying by the Axios news site. “We need to restore deterrence.” According to the report, which cited three US and Israeli sources, Biden did not try to change Netanyahu’s mind.

Speaking not long after Gallant on Tuesday, the IDF’s top spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said that killing senior Hamas members is a top priority.

“We will not stop the effort to eliminate senior Hamas officials, this is a top priority,” Hagari said in a press conference, after Israeli strikes killed two senior Hamas members Monday night

The directive to the forces is clear. Find terrorists and destroy them,” Hagari said. “We are making a strong defense on the border. There were infiltration attempts today, but the terrorists were eliminated before they reached the fence.”Hagari also said the bodies of 103 terrorists were found in Kibbutz Be’eri alone, after they were killed in clashes with troops. More than 100 Israelis were murdered by the terrorists in the kibbutz.

Almost two months after the unprecedented Hamas onslaught on southern Israel, which left some 1,200 people dead, the exact data on those killed in the biggest terror attack in Israeli history is still shrouded in uncertainty.

There have been efforts to compile the available data, particularly the number of babies, children, and elderly people murdered on October 7, even as several members of emergency organizations have been quoted giving imprecise information.

Authorities have identified a total of 274 soldiers and 859 non-soldiers killed during the brutal assault. The latter figure includes 57 Israel Police officers and 38 local security officers. It is unclear which of these individuals were on duty when killed. Removing those victims leaves a figure of 764 civilians.

Partial data by Hebrew media covering the civilians — killed by thousands of invading terrorists and by some of the thousands of rockets fired that day at Israeli cities — reveals that they include two infants, 12 other children under the age of 10, 36 civilians aged 10-19, and 25 elderly people over the age of 80, accounting for 75 of the 764 civilians.

Israel has also named another 15 civilians and members of security forces (not included in the 764 above) who were killed and whose remains are held by terrorists in the Gaza Strip. There are 122 other Israelis and foreigners currently being held hostage in Gaza as a result of the October 7 assault — an unknown number of whom are dead — after a total of 109 hostages were freed by Hamas. Another hostage (a soldier) was rescued alive by IDF forces, and three bodies of slain hostages — two civilians and one soldier — were recovered by Israeli troops and returned to Israel (also to be added to the sum total of Israelis killed on October 7).

An additional seven Israelis are currently listed as missing, with their families having received no information from authorities about whether they were killed or abducted. An unknown number of foreigners are similarly unaccounted for.

An unknown number of bodies — in mid-November the number was around 100 — are still awaiting identification at the Shura pathological center near Tel Aviv, with difficulties in the process arising because of the state of the remains. Some of the remains are believed to belong to Hamas terrorists.

In summary, Israel has officially identified 1,151 people murdered in the Hamas onslaught, with an unknown number of others still awaiting confirmation, and some of the remaining Gaza hostages possibly dead as well.

Authorities have yet to provide an official breakdown on the victims. But the Walla news site has published data by age and gender for 756 of the murdered civilians for which information is available.

One of them was a baby under the age of one year — [10-month-old Mila Cohen](https://www.timesofisrael.com/yona-ohad-mila-cohen-73-43-10-months-three-generations-slain/), killed with her father and grandmother.

According to data by Haaretz, a Bedouin woman at the tail end of her pregnancy was shot in the abdomen while heading to the hospital to give birth, where doctors delivered the baby, but failed to save it.

Additionally, 12 children aged 1 to 9 — 10 boys and two girls — were murdered in the Hamas massacres, according to Walla.

Between the ages of 10 and 19, 36 civilians were murdered, 25 of them male and 11 female.

The largest number of confirmed civilian victims, 421, were in the age group of 20-40. Among them were 259 men and 162 women.

There were 161 victims between the ages of 41 and 64 — 102 men and 59 women.

Walla reported that 100 victims were aged 65-80, including 69 women and 31 men.

And 25 victims were over the age of 80 — 18 men and seven women.

With Israel [using advanced technological methods](https://www.timesofisrael.com/trained-to-analyze-ancient-carnage-archaeologists-locate-victims-among-kibbutz-ashes/) — including from the field of archaeology — to locate the missing and identify more severely mutilated or burnt bodies, authorities hope to soon bring clarity, both to the families of still-missing loved ones, and to the general public, regarding the worst attack on Israeli civilians in the country’s history.

Five opposition lawmakers joined Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s cabinet on Thursday, forming a national emergency government meant to add decades of high-level security experience to the management of the war and isolate far-right influence, six days into Israel’s fight against terror groups in the Gaza Strip.

Speaking from the Knesset rostrum, Netanyahu called the Hamas terror onslaught that massacred over 1,300 — the vast majority of them civilians — and wounded more than 3,000, triggering the war, “the most horrible day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust,” saying it would be hard to find someone unaffected by Hamas’s “barbarism.”

The Knesset voted to approve adding five National Unity ministers to the government, 66 for and four against. Amid the mounting wartime strain on the national health system, the plenum also approved Shas MK Uriel Buso’s elevation to health minister, by a vote of 65 for and 0 against, stripping the portfolio from Interior Minister Moshe Arbel.

The agreement added National Unity MKs Benny Gantz, Gadi Eisenkot, Gideon Sa’ar, Chili Tropper and Yifat Shasha-Biton to the government, as ministers without portfolio. All will sit on the security cabinet, although Shasha-Biton will only hold observer status. Both Gantz and Eisenkot are former Israel Defense Forces chiefs of staff, and Gantz is a former defense minister.

Gantz will also sit on a war cabinet with Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Eisenkot and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, a Netanyahu confidant, will join the war cabinet as observers

Gantz will also sit on a war cabinet with Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Eisenkot and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, a Netanyahu confidant, will join the war cabinet as observers.

Opposition Leader Yair Lapid made early overtures to form a unity government with Netanyahu, but was not part of the final deal. On Thursday, Lapid said that his Yesh Atid party would continue to support the war effort from outside the coalition, but he would not join the government because he does not believe it would work

With the expanded emergency government formally sworn in, the war cabinet is set to meet at least every 48 hours, according to Gantz and Netanyahu’s deal.

Among its various powers, the war cabinet can issue operational directives to security services, and can expand war goals after its first meeting.

In order to secure the deal, Gantz and Netanyahu committed to freezing all non-war related or non-emergency legislation, including bills related to the government’s contentious judicial overhaul package.

Ministers from Likud and National Unity applauded the deal, with Culture and Sport Minister Miki Zohar applauding Gantz, and new National Unity minister Sa’ar celebrating the move as giving broader support to make tough decisions.

“Hard decisions always need wide backing, and that’s what we’re doing today,” Sa’ar said to the Knesset floor.

Making an apparent jab at Yesh Atid for sitting out the emergency government, Sa’ar said, “Yes, it’s easier to support from the outside. You’re not carrying the heavy burden.”

In his remarks before the vote, Lapid pointed to three issues that prevented his party from joining the cabinet: the persistence of “extremists” in the hardline government, a double security cabinet structure without clear lines of authority, and the presence of those at fault for the “failure” to prevent Saturday’s crushing Hamas massacre, which triggered the war

Lapid declined to name the extremists outright, but later in the speech pointed to far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, saying their presence in the government is part of “no way to make decisions.”

Ben Gvir and Smotrich sit on the security cabinet.

Lapid said it was a particular problem that Ben Gvir is in charge of the Israel Police and that Smotrich oversees the West Bank’s Civil Administration, especially as he has failed to condemn recent retributive Jewish violence in Palestinian towns.

“If I had thought that what is happening today is a real unity government, I would have done it,” Lapid said, adding that in the interim, “We’ll support every action, we’ll help every way we can.”

The percentage of Arab Israelis who feel kinship with the state has risen dramatically since war with Hamas broke out on October 7, a new survey has found.

The [poll](https://en.idi.org.il/articles/51431) by the Israel Democracy Institute found the percentage of both Jewish and Arab Israelis who said they feel a part of the State of Israel and its problems at a 20-year high, at 94% and 70% respectively. Among Arabs, the figure stood at 48% in June.

Conversely, Jews and Arabs showed very different results regarding their optimism about the future of the country, with Arabs at a 5-month low, at 27%. Meanwhile, Jews were at a five-month high of 72% — up from 52% in June, amid the internal fight over the government’s contentious judicial overhaul, and slightly up from a rate of 65%-68% in mid-October, shortly after the Hamas attack.

Asked how they rated Israeli society’s resilience, 90% of Jews and 58% of Arabs said it was high.

The survey also found a majority of Israelis (61%) believe the government’s focus on its highly contentious judicial overhaul efforts played a part in Hamas’s decision to launch the assault, and affected the country’s readiness for it.

Asked whether Israel should negotiate immediately for the release of over 240 people abducted to Gaza, 38% said it should but while continuing to fight, 22% said it shouldn’t negotiate, 21% said it should even if it means stopping the military campaign, 10% said it should not negotiate right now, but can when fighting concludes, and 9% didn’t know.

war, October 2023 (Social media)

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In the October 7 Hamas offensive in southern Israel, thousands of terrorists broke through the border and killed some 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and abducted over 240. Israel has waged war on Hamas ever since. The terror group claims over 11,000 people have been killed in the Strip, figures that cannot be verified.

The IDI survey was conducted via the internet and by phone between November 5–6. The maximum sampling error was ±4.04% at a confidence level of 95%.

Israel announced on Sunday that 12 licenses have been awarded to six companies, including British multinational oil and gas firm BP plc and Italian energy giant Eni, to explore and discover additional offshore natural gas fields.

Energy Minister Israel Katz said that the investment commitment by large natural gas exploration companies during this period as Israel is at war with the Hamas terror group is a sign of confidence in Israel’s resilience.

The announcement comes after Israel [decided](https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-heavy-rocket-fire-israel-shuts-down-tamar-offshore-natural-gas-field/) to temporarily shut down the Tamar offshore natural gas field on October 9, two days after the Hamas massacre, which saw some 2,500 terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing some 230 hostages of all ages under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

Reserve, on January 1, 2020. (Flash90/File)

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“The winning companies have committed to unprecedented investments in natural gas exploration over the coming three years, in the hope of discovering new natural gas reserves,” said Katz.

The discoveries would “strengthen Israel’s energy security, international ties, lower the cost of living and provide energy support to accelerate the transition of the economy to renewable energies,”

The offshore tender marks the fourth bidding process for natural gas exploration in Israel’s economic waters, which the ministry said is directed to boost competition, ensure supply to the domestic market, expand state revenues, and encourage the signing of additional gas export agreements.

The winning companies in the fourth offshore bid round are divided into two consortia, which will explore in two areas adjacent to Israel’s Leviathan field, one of the world’s largest deep-water gas discoveries. One group consists of Eni, Dana Petroleum and Ratio Energies and the other group comprises BP, State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) and NewMed Energy.

Initially, exploration licenses will be granted to the winners of the bid for a period of three years. During this period of time, the license holders will perform exploratory work on the entire license areas, as part of the work program commitments included in their bids. After drilling of at least one well and carrying out the additional work plan, it will be possible for license holders to extend the license period in the cluster by two additional years, up to maximum of seven years, as stipulated in the Petroleum Law.Since Israel first discovered natural gas fields off its Mediterranean coast more than a decade ago, the country has emerged as a gas exporter. The natural gas operations have put the country on a path to energy independence — and have shielded it from the worst of the energy crisis sparked by the Russian war on Ukraine this year — in a region with few natural resources.

Major offshore discoveries, including the Leviathan field, which contains an estimated 22 trillion cubic feet of gas, have attracted large oil and gas explorers, such as US energy giant Chevron to partner with local companies.

Back in 2020, Israel started pumping natural gas to Egypt from the Leviathan gas field. In June of last year, Israel, Egypt and the European Union signed a memorandum of understanding that could see Israel export its natural gas to the bloc for the first time.

While the world is focused on the war in Gaza since the Hamas terror group’s devastating assault on Israel, tensions have risen in the West Bank, where 55 Palestinians were killed over the past week in clashes with Israeli troops, arrest raids and attacks by Jewish settlers, according to the Palestinian Authority’s health ministry.

UN monitors said it was the deadliest week for Palestinians in the West Bank since at least 2005.

Since Hamas’s mass incursion into southern Israel, in which terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing over 1,300 people, and abducting some 150-200 hostages of all ages, Israeli forces have held the West Bank under a tight grip, closing crossings into the territory and checkpoints between cities, measures they say are aimed at preventing attacks

The vast majority of those killed on October 7 as the Hamas gunmen seized Israeli border communities were civilians — men, women, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists, in what US President Joe Biden has highlighted as “the worst massacre of the Jewish people since the Holocaust.”

There have been several clashes between IDF forces and Palestinians in the West Bank in the days since, with the army reporting at least 10 attempted terror attacks.

Friday was a particularly deadly day, with 16 Palestinians killed in different incidents in the West Bank, according to PA figures. Police said four of those were shot and killed by officers after [setting off explosive devices](https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-kill-4-palestinians-trying-to-blow-a-hole-in-west-bank-security-barrier/) in an apparent attempt to breach the West Bank security barrier.

The military said Sunday it had arrested 330 people in raids across the West Bank, including 190 affiliated with Hamas, since last weekend’s attack. It said 33 Hamas members alone were arrested in raids overnight Saturday.

The renewed crackdown comes as Israel is concerned about the conflict escalating into a multi-front war, particularly the possibility of Lebanon’s Iran-backed Hezbollah terror organization joining the battle.

But Palestinians claim the latest Israeli measures in the West Bank have only further blurred the line between security forces and radical, violent settlers. Israel’s National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, a far-right settler with a long history of anti-Arab incitement, responded to the Hamas attack by distributing more weapons to the settler population and tasking settlers with security.In a statement after the Hamas massacres in southern Israel, he said his office was distributing 10,000 firearms, as well as combat gear, protective vests and helmets, to Israeli civilians — with a particular focus on residents of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

“We will change the world so that the settlements will be protected,” he said. “I have ordered the massive arming of the civilian standby units in order to protect the settlements and the cities.”

On Friday, a video showed a settler with an assault rifle walking into the village of Al-Tuwani in the southern West Bank and shooting a Palestinian point blank.

Two days earlier, the PA [reported](https://www.timesofisrael.com/three-palestinians-said-killed-in-clashes-with-settlers-in-west-bank/) settlers shot dead three Palestinians in the village of Qusra, near the northern West Bank city of Nablus. On Thursday, [settlers attacked their funeral](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-palestinians-killed-after-settlers-said-to-ambush-funeral-in-west-bank/), killing another two men, according to the PA health ministry. Video footage showed the settlers swerving their cars into the funeral procession before stopping and opening fire.

On Thursday, settlers arrived at Wadi Seeq, a small Bedouin village home to around 200 people in the central West Bank, as Palestinians there packed up their belongings. They had already moved all of the women, children and livestock to a safer area in recent days because of rising threats, a resident of the village said. Witnesses said that the settlers opened fire, wounding three Palestinians and driving the rest out of the village.

Abdelrahman Kaabni, the head of the Wadi Seeq village council, said that soldiers and police had taken part in the attack, beating and arresting residents. As the villagers of Wadi Seeq fled settler violence, they left behind cisterns, livestock, solar panels and two vehicles. “The settlers took everything, and now they’re squatting in our homes,” Kaabni said.

Wadi Seeq is the sixth Bedouin village to have pulled up stakes in the last year in response to an uptick in settler attacks. Many more are in danger of being completely displaced, according to the West Bank Protection Consortium, a coalition of aid groups and donor countries, including the European Union, that support Palestinian communities.

Neither COGAT, the Israeli defense body responsible for civilian affairs, nor the Israeli military responded to requests for comment. In the past, authorities have said troops only open fire in response to threats or to disperse violent protests and that soldiers protect Palestinians from settler attacks.

The UN said last month that 1,100 Palestinians had been displaced by settler violence in the last year, an unprecedented figure. Over just the last few days, around 200 to 300 Palestinians have been displaced in Wadi Seeq and other areas, the consortium said — often by settlers who are armed.

“They’re leaving now because they feel completely unprotected. They’re so scared of those settlers who have come in and threatened them,” said Allegra Pacheco, who heads the consortium.

Most of the attacks come from settler outposts established without government authorization but protected by the Israeli army. Over 500,000 Jewish settlers live in nearly 150 settlements across the West Bank, which is home to some 2.5 million Palestinians. Most of the international community views settlements as illegal and a major obstacle to peace. Israel captured the West Bank, along with Gaza and East Jerusalem, in the 1967 Six Day War. The Palestinians want the territories for their future state.

On Saturday, Israeli military spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari appeared to be calling on settlers to stand down, saying: “The responsibility for security in the settlements and on the roads lies with the army alone.”

But messages continued to circulate on WhatsApp groups that Jewish settlers have created since the start of the war to coordinate operations in the West Bank. A description of one chat group with over 800 participants told residents to prepare for “the possibility of mobilizing for a joint activity with the security forces for the immediate demolition of terrorist houses.”

The message urged residents to “eliminate” any Palestinian approaching a settlement.

“From the stories flowing in from the Gaza Strip, it is clear that we cannot rely on the army alone to be able to protect us in a time of chaos,” it read. “Are you ready for war?

AFP — Nearly two decades after Israeli settlers left Gaza, the Hamas terror group’s October 7 attacks on Israeli territory, and the subsequent war, have rekindled a wish among some of a return to the Palestinian enclave.

“It cannot be more dangerous to have our families inside Gaza than next to Gaza,” said Zevulun Kalfa, 61, recalling the bloody assault carried out by some 2,500 terrorists earlier this month that hit his kibbutz and other Israeli communities near the border of the Gaza Strip.

Some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, were killed during the assault, and at least 228 more were abducted into the Strip. Entire families were shot or burnt to death in their homes, and some 260 people were mown down at an outdoor music festival.

Kalfa has fond memories of his years in the former Israeli settlement of Atzmona, just north of Rafah in the southern Strip.

“We would hitchhike to Shejaiya (in Gaza City) without weapons… just to do our shopping or go to the dentist,” said Kalfa. “They would sell us fish.”

But his former neighbors — Gaza’s Palestinian inhabitants — have allowed “Hamas to feed hatred to their children,” Kalfa claimed.

Israel unilaterally withdrew the last of its troops and 8,000 settlers on September 11, 2005, ending the Israeli presence in Gaza that began in 1967 with the Six Day War. Israel has continued to maintain near complete control over the territory’s borders, as has Egypt.

The images from 2005 of weeping Israelis leaving their homes in Gaza settlements, soldiers in tears as they carried out evacuation orders, bulldozers razing houses and synagogues set ablaze by the entering Palestinians have been etched into the collective Israeli memory.

While no Israeli officials have suggested that a potential ground invasion into Gaza would have the aim of resettling the territory, some parts of public opinion now view resettlement as a fitting response to the October 7 violence.

“We have children and grandchildren who dream of returning there,” said Kalfa, now an administrative official in Sa’ad, a Jewish religious kibbutz less than four kilometers (2.5 miles) from the Gaza border.

“As soon as the government decides, we’re ready.”

Rabbi Yitzhak Amitai, also a former settler, stood armed and in uniform near the entrance to Sa’ad. “With God’s help” his family would soon resettle in Gaza, he said.

Israel’s settlements in the West Bank and Golan Heights are considered illegal under international law, as were those in Gaza prior to 2005.

Kalfa voiced more skepticism of a hypothetical renewed Israeli presence inside Gaza, but drew parallels with the capture of East Jerusalem during the Six Day War, which he said had not been part of Israel’s objectives at the time.

“We said back in 2014 (when Israeli forces last launched a major ground incursion into Gaza) that the only solution was a land incursion, complete cleansing of Hamas and reestablishment of Israeli authority” over the Palestinian territory of 2 million inhabitants, Kalfa added.

About 1.4 million residents of Gaza have been internally displaced since the latest war broke out, according to the UN humanitarian agency OCHA.

The case for Gaza resettlement has gained some ground among Israelis, many of whom were traumatized and galvanized by the October 7 massacreRecent public opinion polls suggested wide support among Israelis for a continued offensive against Hamas.

In Gaza, the Hamas-run health ministry said Israeli raids have killed more than 6,500 people, most of them civilians. However, it is not possible for these numbers to be verified by external sources, and the figure likely includes Hamas’s own dead as well as those killed by misfired Gazan rockets aimed at Israel that fell short within the Strip. Israel estimates that 1,500 Hamas terrorists alone were killed by Israeli security forces inside Israel following their rampage.

The move toward more hawkish views on Gaza in Israeli public opinion comes less than a year after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed what is considered one of the most right-wing governments in Israel’s 75-year history, with pro-settlement allies.

“We return to Gaza,” read some 15 signs put up at the entrance to Jerusalem, calling for donations to a fundraising campaign for settlements.

In footage that went viral this week on social media, Israeli singer Hanan Ben Ari, entertaining troops at an army base, called: “We return to Gush Katif” — Israel’s term for the former settlement bloc in Gaza.

“We (will) set up Nova beach on the Gaza beach,” Ben Ari sang to the tune of one of his hits, referring to the Supernova desert rave where more than 260 people were brutally murdered by Hamas on October 7.

Along with the video, the Hebrew hashtag “Nova Beach” has become instantly popular.

Elad, 50, a reserve soldier who asked to be identified by his first name only, had spent his childhood in a Gaza settlement and now lives in another in the West Bank.

He told AFP that after the war, he would want to “return to Gaza, where there are the best beaches in Israel.”

“These acts constitute gross violation of international law, and, in particular, of international criminal law,” declared the document, signed by academic figures and legal authorities in Israel and abroad.

“Videos, released mostly by Hamas, posted on social media, document acts of torture, sexual violence, violence towards children and molestation of bodies,”

“As these widespread, horrendous acts appear to have been carried out with an ‘intent to destroy, in whole or in part’ a national group – Israelis – a goal explicitly declared by Hamas, they most probably constitute an international crime of genocide, proscribed by the Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” it added.

Among those who signed the document was Prof. Irwin Cotler, the former justice minister and attorney general of Canada.

Dan Eldad, who served as Israel’s acting state attorney from February to May 2020 and who helped put the letter together, told The Times of Israel that it may have key diplomatic value should Israel seek to persuade other countries or international organizations that remain on the fence to come down on its side, and in confronting those who express support for the Palestinian position.

“They can go to them and say, ‘Look, it was genocide,'” he said.

On October 7, over 1,500 Hamas terrorists stormed Israel’s border around the Gaza Strip and murderously rampaged through southern areas, taking over communities and killing the men, women and children they found, as well as overrunning military sites with similar deadly results. The toll from the bloody assault, which came alongside a widespread barrage of 5,000 rockets fired indiscriminately at towns and cities across Israel, has swelled to more than 1,300, the vast majority of them civilians. Thousands more were injured, hundreds of them seriously.

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Among the dead were dozens of babies. Some of the victims, including entire families who were butchered, were reportedly beheaded. At an outdoor music festival, surrounded by the attackers, 260 people were systematically mowed down. In addition, the terrorists abducted around 150 people of all ages, including children and elderly women, dragging them to Gaza as captives. Hamas has continued to indiscriminately rain rockets on civilian areas of southern and central issues since the attack started.

The legal opinion released Sunday was organized by the Hostage and Missing Families Forum, a volunteer-based organization that was formed after the attack and is striving to secure the return of the hostages held in the Gaza Strip.

Eldad said the document was composed by a number of professors in Israel who then distributed it to their peers across the world.

“The taking of hostages is defined as a war crime,” the statement said, clarifying that laws regarding the right to hold prisoners of war do not apply to terrorist organizations.

“Thus, holding both civilian and soldier hostages constitutes a war crime,” the document continued. “The circumstances surrounding the kidnapping of all hostages, civilian and soldiers, reveals that they were taken with the purpose of holding them hostage. Hamas must release all hostages immediately.”

Further, “the abduction of people without provision of information regarding their whereabouts constitutes the [war] crime of enforced disappearances.” Available information indicates that “many abductees were tortured by their captors” and as those acts were committed as part of Hamas’s policy to attack civilians they “constitute crimes against humanity, for which perpetrators must bear full accountability,” the experts said.

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Until the hostages are released, Hamas is obliged under international law to provide information about the captives including their medical condition, as well as providing medical care, they stressed.

They called for the International Committee of the Red Cross and “all relevant UN agencies” to demand Hamas grant access to the abductees.

“These organizations must also do their utmost to ensure that essential foodstuff and appropriate medical treatment are provided,”

The international community and organizations have a duty to use all means to pressure Hamas to give precedence to the immediate release of protected groups, such as “children, women, older persons, people with disabilities and those in need of medical treatment,” the document urged.

Israel has retaliated to the attacks with artillery and airstrikes, and officials from the Hamas-controlled health ministry estimated more than 2,000 Palestinians dead. Israel says it is targeting terrorist infrastructure and all areas where Hamas operates or hides out while issuing evacuation warnings to civilians in regions it plans to attack.

A [coded document](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-coded-doc-hamas-instructed-terrorists-to-kill-civilians-take-captives-report/) found in a vehicle used by Hamas terrorists in their shock assault on Israel showed they were instructed to massacre civilians and take captives, according to a television report Saturday.

The Kan public broadcaster reported that the document was recovered at Kibbutz Re’im, outside of which at least 260 people were killed and an unknown number taken hostage at a music festival.

The report came a day after Kan revealed a different document left behind by a Hamas terrorist in southern Israel that ordered terrorists to kill as many civilians as possible in their takeover of Kibbutz Alumim.

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On Saturday, NBC News reported on additional documents recovered from terrorists showed extensive Hamas plans to target an elementary school and a youth center, kill “as many people as possible” and take hostages quickly into Gaza from Kibbutz Sa’ad.

The Health Ministry on Monday instructed members of the healthcare system not to cooperate with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, citing its perceived anti-Israel stance.

In recent weeks, senior physicians and hospital staff who treated October 7 victims and released hostages have received letters and emails from the [commission](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-israel/index), which operates under the UN Council for Human Rights. The commission requested information and interviews for its [investigation of international and gender-based crimes](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/commission-inquiry-collecting-evidence-war-crimes-committed-all-sides-israel) since the beginning of the current Israel-Hamas war.

The findings of the commission’s investigations will be presented in its reports to the Human Rights Council in June and to the UN General Assembly in October.

Israel’s Kan public broadcaster reported that the Justice Ministry instructed the legal department of the Health Ministry to tell Israeli doctors and others involved in the care of October 7 victims and released hostages not to speak with the committee of inquiry.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lior Haiat called the commission “an anti-Israeli and antisemitic body” and said Israel would not cooperate with it.

When asked by The Times of Israel what these claims were based on, Haiat said, “The commission of inquiry is there to investigate Israel without any time limits, unlike any other commission of inquiry from the UN system.”

“Furthermore, the three people chosen to head it are famous antisemitic and anti-Israel people,”

The commission’s chair is Navanethem (Navi) Pillay from South Africa, who served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014 and is currently a judge ad hoc of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

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The commission’s other leaders are Miloon Kothari from India, the first UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, and Chris Sidoti from Australia, an international human rights consultant and an expert in national human rights institutions and international human rights law and mechanisms.

All three have made [statements](https://www.timesofisrael.com/member-of-un-gaza-probe-apologizes-for-jewish-lobby-remark-slammed-as-antisemitic/) in the past that Israel has deemed to be incorrect, offensive, or defamatory regarding the Jewish state or the global Jewish community, or both.

n an October 25 videotaped UN [press conference](https://youtu.be/XuPGXoKCCz8?si=-TC9O4vWzLVzSJfK), Pillay noted the commission’s [statement](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/commission-inquiry-collecting-evidence-war-crimes-committed-all-sides-israel) released on October 10 condemning the Hamas attacks and calling for a cessation of hostilities and the return of hostages. “We named and condemned Hamas, but we also unequivocally condemn Israeli military attacks that result inevitably in the deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza,” Pillay said.

“Because of this continuing mandate of ours, we are in the position to examine issues such as the right of defense. But as we see it played out here, it is more a matter of retaliation and revenge,” she said.

Pillay characterized the Israeli government’s military policies and plans in the current war as “activity with the intent of pursuing collective punishment on all of Gaza and all Palestinian citizens.”

Kothari, in an interview with the anti-Israel website Mondoweiss in July 2022, was asked about criticism of the UN Commission of Inquiry investigating rights abuses in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

“We are very disheartened by the social media that is controlled largely by, whether it is the Jewish lobby or it is specific NGOs, a lot of money is being thrown into trying to discredit us,” he said in the interview.

He also said, the same month: “I would go as far as to raise the question of why Israel is even a member of the United Nations.”

In June 2022, Sidoti dismissed accusations of antisemitism against the commission and said these were being “thrown around like rice at a wedding.”

“It is a tragedy and a travesty to trivialize antisemitism for political purposes, to rob it of its content, to use it as a shield for ordinary criticism of the actions of a state,” he added.

While Israel has criticized the UN and international human rights organizations for [not immediately calling out](https://www.timesofisrael.com/graphic-report-details-new-evidence-of-rape-sexual-violence-during-october-7-rampage/) war crimes and gender-based crimes committed by Hamas against Israelis on October 7, it opposes an investigation by this particular body, which has a long history of perceived anti-Israel bias.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel was established by the UN Human Rights Council in May 2021, following [Operation Guardian of the Walls](https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/wars-and-operations/operation-guardian-of-the-walls/operation-guardian-of-the-walls-1/). The conflict, sparked by rocket fire by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad from Gaza on Jerusalem and other Israeli cities, lasted 12 days. The conflict also involved violent civil unrest between Jews and Arabs within Israel.

The commission of inquiry was set up as “an ongoing, independent, international commission of inquiry to investigate, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel, all alleged violations of international humanitarian law and abuses of international human rights law leading up and since 13 April 2021.”

The commission has an additional mandate to “investigate all underlying root causes of recurrent tensions, instability and protraction of [the] conflict, including systematic discrimination and repression based on national, ethnic, racial or religious identity.”

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The commission has held several public hearings in Geneva, and in December 2022 welcomed the UN General Assembly resolution requesting an ICJ advisory opinion relating to “the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.”

In one of its reports, the commission condemned “attacks, restrictions, and harassment of civil society actors in Israel, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory including East Jerusalem,” placing blame mainly on Israeli authorities.

It labeled this as “part of the Israeli government’s goal of ensuring and enshrining its permanent occupation at the expense of the rights of the Palestinian people.”

In an interview with South African Broadcasting Corporation in November, Pillay stated, “Israel’s increasingly militarized law enforcement operations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and repeated attacks on Gaza, consistently violate international human rights law and international humanitarian law.”

It is hard in the wake of the October 7 massacre to calmly contemplate Palestinian strategy and thinking. There is no Israeli unaffected, no one without family and friends reeling from the Hamas onslaught, no one, including this writer, not overcome with anxiety for relatives or neighbors now called up to the war.

And yet it is necessary. It is necessary to understand the enemy, the chain of rationalization and habits of mind that produced it and shaped its strategy of brutality.

That enemy is not the Palestinian people, of course, even though support for terror attacks is widespread among Palestinians. The enemy is not exactly Hamas either, though Hamas is part of it. The enemy is the Palestinian theory of Israelis that makes the violence seen on October 7 seem to many of them a rational step on the road to liberation rather than, as Israelis judge it, yet another in a long string of self-inflicted disasters for the Palestinian cause.

The October 7 massacre wasn’t an outlier in Hamas’s long history of brutality; it was its apotheosis. It was what Hamas would do if it could. On that dark Saturday it suddenly found that it could, and so it did.

But the unbelievable brutality displayed by the terrorists doesn’t mean the massacre was an emotional act. Palestinian terrorism is rarely chaotic and emotionally driven. The most horrifying examples of it, suicide bombings of the past or the rampage and mass kidnapping seen on Saturday, are carefully planned and deliberate acts.

The Palestinian strategy of terrorizing Israeli civilians is old, older even than the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. When the PLO was founded in 1964 with the goal of driving the Jews from the country, the West Bank was still ruled by Jordan and the Gaza Strip by Egypt. The PLO adopted terrorism as the basic strategy for Palestinian liberation not in anger, but because it had just witnessed the astonishing success of the Algerian National Liberation Front in using such terrorism to drive the French from Algeria in 1962.And it goes back further still. Organized Palestinian violence against the Jews in 1920, 1929, the so-called Arab Revolt of 1936-39 — all followed the same basic theory: The Jews are an artificial, rootless polity removable by sustained violence, so sustained violence must be deployed to remove them.

This Palestinian vision of Israelis is taught to Palestinian children as the basic truth of the Palestinian struggle. The contrast between “rooted” Palestine and “artificial” Israel is a major theme of Palestinian identity.

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The consequences of this longstanding vision and strategy has been nothing short of shattering for Palestinians.

### What do they want?

Supporters of the Palestinian cause in the West, even as they are discomfited by images of parents lying murdered in front of their children or the burned corpses of babies, are now asking a simple question in Hamas’s defense: “What would you do if faced with decades of Israeli occupation?” Israel’s policies in the West Bank and toward Gaza, and the pain and injustices that flow from them, they argue, are the cause of the kind of hatred on display on October 7

The problem for Palestinians — and it is a problem with immense consequences for them — is that the vast majority of Israelis disagree. They believe Hamas would have acted the same even if the occupation had ended two decades ago. This belief may seem self-serving to outsiders, but it’s rooted in deep and painful experience.

The fall of 2000 saw the start of a wave of some 140 suicide bombings in Israeli cities and towns, killing grandmothers and infants in buses and pizzerias and driving the political left from power so comprehensively that a generation later it has scarcely recovered.

The shattering effect of this mass murder wasn’t caused just by the shock and trauma of the attacks. It was also the timing.

In 2000, the peace process hadn’t yet seen two decades of stagnation. No far-right parties sat in the ruling coalition. Ending the occupation was an idea that won an election. Negotiators at Camp David were reported to be discussing shared Israeli-Palestinian sovereignty on the Temple Mount. There were no Israeli soldiers in any Palestinian city or town — they’d been pulled out over the previous three years — and Palestinian incomes and college education rates were rising. Things seemed to be falling into place. Peace, many Israelis assumed, was imminent.

The political left had also fought what amounted to an internal political civil war to get to that point, seen its leader assassinated and eked out a hard-won victory in the 1999 election to finish the job of peacemaking, and the result of its efforts was the most gruesome and sustained Palestinian assault on Israeli civilians in the country’s history.

So what was that massive, sustained terrorist wave about?

Palestinian explanations only heightened the anger. Palestinian officials went on Israeli television and told Israelis that the culprit was the visit to the Temple Mount by then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon shortly before the outbreak of violence. For the Israeli left, it was worse than no explanation at all. It amounted to telling left-wing Israelis that all their struggles and sacrifices for peace had stood on a foundation of dust and were demolished by the first act of right-wing political posturing that Palestinians found unpleasant. This spasm of killings, the Palestinian explanation implied, was inevitable.

Palestinian intellectuals have since offered better answers, including that the violence began as an internal Palestinian uprising against Yasser Arafat’s increasingly tyrannical regime in Ramallah, a kind of presaging of the Arab Spring in 2011, and was quickly deflected by a frightened Arafat into a campaign of terrorism targeting Israeli civilians.

But amid the bombings, few Israelis had the bandwidth to contemplate such complexities.

To them, it felt like all Palestinians had rallied to the murderous campaign. To recruit hundreds of suicide bombers (some 140 made it past the Israeli security services; a much larger number tried or made plans to), one needs an infrastructure of recruitment, a leadership that offers religious and social validation for the attacks, supply networks, laboratories and engineers to produce the bombs, a basic intelligence apparatus to help the bombers past Israeli security, along with bank accounts, safe-houses and the like.

And for what? The question has haunted and undermined the Israeli left for a generation.

Would an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank have prevented Hamas’s attack on October 7? Israelis, still living in the shadow of that two-decade-old trauma, do not think so. They believe, truly and earnestly, including among liberal voters, that such a withdrawal would only have created a larger terror polity capable of launching a much larger rampage.

And that Israeli belief is the Palestinians’ single biggest strategic problem, even if neither their leaders nor their overseas supporters are willing to acknowledge it.

This belief immunizes Israelis to outside pressure. If the response of Palestinian politics to the Oslo peace process was the mass murder of Israeli civilians, and the response of Palestinian politics to the stagnation of the peace process under Benjamin Netanyahu is the mass murder of Israeli civilians, then Israeli policy isn’t the cause of Palestinian mass murder of Israeli civilians.

Similarly, while overseas activists threaten Israelis with boycotts if they don’t leave the West Bank, Hamas threatens Israelis with murder from any territory they do abandon. Hamas is louder.

The point isn’t that this Israeli experience is the objective, comprehensive historical truth, but only that the vast majority of the Israeli Jewish mainstream believes it and that this belief is strong and rooted in blood-soaked experience. It has rendered Israelis immune to both foreign economic pressure and Palestinian violence.

In the Israeli mind, the Palestinian national movement seems set against itself. There is nothing the global campaign for Palestine can do in the Israeli psyche that Hamas’s brutality won’t undo.

### Clarity

Then came Saturday, and the death of Israeli questions. For a moment, Israel’s guard went down. Hamas was free to live out its intentions. It did so with blazing clarity and purpose.

It is obvious to Israelis that Hamas’s brutal strategy cannot liberate Palestinians, so the violence can’t be explained to them as an attempt at liberation. Nor does Hamas bother to articulate its strategic rationale to Israelis, as Algeria’s FLN once did so clearly to the French. It asks them to flee or die, but can’t articulate where they should flee to.

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Israelis are now convinced that the massacre on October 7, in its enormity and astonishing cruelty, and especially in the joy with which it was carried out, wasn’t a Palestinian miscalculation, because Palestinian independence wasn’t its goal.

The goal on October 7, as in the fall of 2000, was simply the complete removal of the Jews from this land.

With clarity comes closure. Israelis are unified as never before, and not just by the horrors perpetrated by Hamas. Their question is answered at long last. The brutality they once saw as a question turned out to be the answer, the purpose and end of much of Palestinian politics.

One can seek out the ideological roots of Hamas’s strategy of brutality in 20th-century decolonization movements or in theologies of Islamic renewal. But that history is mere background decor to the essential point — that this is a brutality that explodes against peace processes as much as against threats of annexation. No peace and no withdrawal will satisfy this impulse or grant Israeli Jews safety from the kind of wild, joyful hatred displayed on October 7.

And that brutality has now made itself too dangerous to be tolerated.

Hamas does not yet seem to realize how deep the Israeli public’s determination goes. Hamas’s only strategy for survival seems to be forcing the Israel Defense Forces to inflict so high a civilian toll in Gaza that the world demands a stop to the Israeli war machine.

But Israelis will be reeling from the images of October 7 for a long time to come. They have their answer, and from it flows a clarity of purpose that has been missing for the past three decades. The Israeli war machine will be implacable. Hamas will not survive.

A tragedy is about to unfold in Gaza made worse by the long learning curve it will take for Hamas to grasp the depth of Israeli resolve. It has robbed Israel of any other interest but its destruction. In the Israeli mind, any brutality Hamas *can* commit it *will* commit. And so it cannot be allowed to ever commit any act ever again.

And at the end of this long, dark path, this is, perhaps, the lone spark of optimism.

When Hamas is destroyed, Israel will finally have liberated the Palestinian cause from the bottomless brutality of its most fervent practitioners, from the shattering albatross of a violent decolonization movement that refuses to grasp its enemy has no colonial motherland to which they can return, and so from an addiction to cruelty without purpose or function.

Western supporters of Palestinians will no longer be forced to justify the purposeful massacre of babies in their rush to protect the Palestinian national movement from itself. And Israeli critics of Israeli policy will be free to focus on Israeli misdeeds without having to answer for Palestinian savagery even and especially in times of peacemaking.

A brutalized, embittered Israel will finally liberate the Palestinians from their own wrecked vision of their cause and their enemy, not out of magnanimity but out of Israeli necessity and pain. Hamas’s destruction alone won’t bring peace, but perhaps it isn’t too optimistic to hope it can mark the end of Palestine’s long collapse.

The gas-rich nation of Qatar has become a key intermediary in the fate of the 220 hostages currently held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip following the terror group’s deadly attack on Israel on October 7, once again putting the small Arabian Peninsula country in the spotlight.

The negotiations have also thrust Qatar into a delicate international balancing act as it maintains a relationship with those viewed as terrorist groups by the West, while trying to preserve its close security ties with the United States.

Under arrangements stemming from past Hamas ceasefire understandings with Israel, the gas-rich emirate of Qatar has in recent years paid the salaries of civil servants in the Gaza Strip, provided direct cash transfers to poor families and offered other kinds of humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza.

atar has also hosted Hamas’s political office in its capital of Doha for over a decade. Among officials based there is Khaled Mashaal, the former head of Hamas who survived a 1997 Israeli assassination attempt in Jordan that threatened to derail that country’s peace deal with Israel; and Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas’s current chief.

The US sanctioned Mashaal in 2003 for being “responsible for supervising assassination operations, bombings and the killing of Israeli settlers.” Washington sanctioned Haniyeh in 2018, saying he had “close links with Hamas’s military wing and has been a proponent of armed struggle, including against civilians.”

Mashaal, in an interview with Sky News this week, said hostages taken during Hamas’s attack on October 7 could be released if Israel stops its airstrikes — an incredibly unlikely suggestion as Israel prepares for a ground offensive inside the Gaza Strip.

The October 7 attack saw thousands of Hamas terrorists breach the Gaza border fence and conduct massacres in Israeli communities, taking the lives of some 1,400 people.

Israel’s military says at least 224 people, including foreigners, were believed captured by Hamas during the incursion and taken into Gaza. Four of those have been released, a mother and daughter on Friday and [two more](https://www.timesofisrael.com/freed-hamas-hostage-recounts-ordeal-slams-israeli-failures-speaks-well-of-captors/) on Monday

day. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, Pool)

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“Let them stop this aggression and you will find the mediators like Qatar and Egypt and some Arab countries and others will find a way to have them released and we’ll send them to their homes,” Mashaal said of the hostages.

Hosting the Hamas leaders has brought scrutiny to Qatar, both in the past and since the killings on October 7, the deadliest day in Israel’s history.

However, the Biden administration has repeatedly praised Qatar for its efforts in working to free the hostages and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Doha during his recent shuttle diplomacy trip in the region.

“Qatar is a longtime partner of ours who is responding to our request, because I think they believe that innocent civilians ought to be freed,” State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Monday.

Meanwhile, Qatar’s ruling emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, has channeled the wider anger in the Arab world over Israel’s operation in the Gaza Strip, which was launched after the attack inside Israel with the goal of eradicating Hamas and destroying their infrastructure.

According to unverified reports by the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry, over 5,700 Gazans have been killed in the Israeli air campaign. The number of terror operatives among them is unknownOn Tuesday, the emir [lashed out](https://www.timesofisrael.com/qatari-emir-a-hamas-ally-claims-israels-allies-granting-free-license-to-kill/) at Israel’s backers, accusing them of giving the country a “free license to kill” and declaring that “enough is enough.”

“It is untenable for Israel to be given an unconditional green light and free license to kill, nor is it tenable to continue ignoring the reality of occupation, siege, and settlement,” the Qatari leader said.

“It should not be allowed in our time to use cutting off water and preventing medicine and food as weapons against an entire population,” he added, referring to Israel’s “complete siege” of Gaza, as Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has termed the effort to raise the pressure on Hamas.

Israeli leaders have said it is unthinkable that the country should keep supplying goods and energy to the enclave following the onslaught, and with terrorists holding hundreds captive.

Placing the blame for regional insecurity on Israel, Al-Thani called for “an earnest regional and international stance vis-à-vis this dangerous escalation that we are witnessing, and which threatens the security of the region and the world.”

During Qatar’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup last year, Palestinian flags were prominently displayed and Israeli journalists were sometimes harassed.

Since Saturday, several dozen aid trucks have been granted passage into Gaza after being checked by Israel for weapons or other items that could be used by Hamas. But international organizations say some 100 a day are needed to meet the needs of the population.

Qatar, a peninsula sticking out like a thumb into the Persian Gulf with a small population and military, has always looked warily at its larger neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iran. It faced a years-long boycott by four Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia, over a political dispute, which Kuwait’s ruler at the time warned could have sparked a war

It also bore withering criticism from the US and others over its pan-Arab satellite news network Al Jazeera. It aired statements from the late al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden and has been providing nonstop coverage of the toll of Israel’s punishing airstrikes in this war with Hamas, including images of the dead and dying that have fueled demonstrations across the Middle East and wider world.

But those concerns about larger powers have seen Qatar balance the risks through its diplomacy and hosting of the forward headquarters of the US military’s Central Command at its sprawling Al-Udeid Air Base. The US considers Qatar as a major non-NATO ally and Doha has widening defense trade and security cooperation with America, including priority delivery for certain military sales.

The Al-Udeid base served as a key node in America’s chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, while Qatar also hosted the Taliban officials with whom Washington earlier negotiated to end the longest US war.

But Qatar’s negotiations have led to headaches in the past.

Most recently, Qatar agreed to have just under $6 billion in Iranian assets, once frozen in South Korea, transferred to Doha as part of a September prisoner swap between Tehran and the US. After the Hamas attack, Qatar and the US agreed not to act on any request from Tehran to access those funds for humanitarian goods as initially planned — at least for now.

That enraged sanctions-choked Iran and left Qatar “walking the tightrope of international relations,” said David B. Roberts, who has long studied Qatar as an associate professor at King’s College London and recently published the book “Security Politics in the Gulf Monarchies.”

“The reality is it is quite straightforward that so many senior government people in Israel and America want Qatar to have this role and… Qatar ultimately will be seen in a broadly positive light in trying to free these hostages,” Roberts said.

“If you do want this unique spot,” he added, “then you’re not signing yourself up for an easy life.”

Israeli drones, artillery, and tanks struck targets in Lebanon on Friday after an apparent drone was intercepted, shots were fired at a number of military posts on the northern frontier and an explosion damaged the border security barrier, the Israel Defense Forces said.

The incidents were the latest skirmishes around the Lebanese border amid fears that the Lebanon-based Hezbollah terror group will open up a second front amid the war triggered by last weekend’s unprecedented Hamas invasion from the Gaza Strip, which killed more than 1,300 Israelis, most of them civilians.

It also came amid new warnings from Hezbollah and Iran that the fighting could escalate into a regional conflict.

The IDF said an explosion caused minor damage to a section of the security wall on the Lebanon border near the northern kibbutz of Hanita. Troops responded with artillery fire toward Lebanon in the area.

The home Front Command briefly issued an alert of a possible infiltration near Kibbutz Hanita, but soon sounded an all-clear

Shortly after, several IDF posts along the border came under small arms fire

The army said tanks shelled a Hezbollah post on the border in response and shelled the source of the gunfire with artillery.

A short while later, rocket warning sirens sounded in Kibbutz Misgav Am. The IDF later said air defenses intercepted an “unidentified target” — believed to be a drone — that crossed into Israeli territory

In response to the apparent drone crossing into Israeli airspace, the IDF said it was carrying out drone strikes against Hezbollah sites.

Hezbollah claimed responsibility for targeting Israeli military posts on the Lebanon border with small arms fire, saying the attack came in response to “Israeli aggression,” in an apparent reference to artillery fire after a section of Israel’s border wall was damaged in an explosion.

An MSNBC reporter said that a cameraman with the Reuters news agency had been killed in the Israeli shelling.

Also Friday, the IDF declared some areas in the northern town of Metula a closed military zone.

The closed military zone only applies to sections of the town near the Lebanon border fence. Residents who have left the town in recent days were asked to not return.

“We are in continuous contact with army officials, hold daily situation assessment meetings and will continue to update on all developments,” the municipality said.

Security sources said the order came because of continuous riots and protests along the border by supporters of Hezbollah Palestinian terror groups.

Metula in recent days had recommended that residents leave the town amid the tensions.

**Threats from Iran and Hezbollah**

Amid the spiraling tensions, Hezbollah said Friday it would be “fully prepared” to join its Palestinian ally Hamas in the war against Israel when the time is right.

Hezbollah deputy chief Naim Qassem spoke as Hamas and Israel traded heavy fire for a seventh day.

Israel has retaliated for the unprecedented Hamas assault by striking Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip, killing some 1,800 people, according to the Hamas-run health ministry. The IDF also said it killed some 1,500 terrorists inside Israel.

“We, as Hezbollah, are contributing to the confrontation and will (continue) to contribute to it within our vision and plan,” Qassem told a pro-Palestinian rally in Beirut’s southern suburbs.

“We are fully prepared, and when the time comes for action, we will take it,” he said.

The official, whose remarks coincided with a visit to Beirut by Iran’s foreign minister, rebuffed calls for Hezbollah to stay out of the war.

Outreach by “major countries, Arab countries, and envoys from the United Nations, directly and indirectly, asking us not to interfere in the battle, will not affect us,” he said, adding: “Hezbollah knows its duties.”

In Beirut’s southern suburbs on Friday, more than 1,000 Hezbollah supporters rallied for Gaza, carrying Palestinian flags and banners that read: “May God protect you.”

“(Hassan) Nasrallah, strike Tel Aviv,” they chanted, addressing the leader of the Shiite Muslim group.

Iran also issued threats of a wider confrontation.

The United States must rein in Israel to avert a regional spillover of the war with Hamas, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said Friday in Beirut, adding Tehran was seeking to safeguard Lebanon’s security.

“America wants to give Israel a chance to destroy Gaza, and this is… a grave mistake,” Amir-Abdollahian said, adding, “If the Americans want to prevent the war in the region from developing, they must control Israel.”

Although Tehran has been a long-term backer of  Hamas, Iranian officials have been adamant the Islamic Republic had no involvement in the terror group’s weekend attack on Israel.

“Lebanon’s security and peace is important to us,” Amir-Abdollahian said after meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

“One of the goals of our trip is to stress on Lebanon’s security,” he added.

But he did not completely rule out the chance of an escalation.

During a news conference with his Lebanese counterpart later on Friday, he said: “If the systemic war crimes of the Zionist regime do not stop immediately, any possibility is conceivable.”

Also on Friday, Amir-Abdollahian met with Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah to discuss “potential outcomes” and the “positions that must be taken” in light of the latest developments, according to a Hezbollah statement.

Israel has traded fire with Hezbollah and allied Palestinian factions in Lebanon in recent days, although the tit-for-tat attacks have remained limited.

As Israel’s operation to eliminate Hamas and its military threat to the State of Israel continues into its third week, voices of criticism from the United Nations, human rights groups, and numerous other parties against the IDF’s campaign have inevitably grown louder.

The IDF has said its bombing campaign, launched after Hamas terrorists slaughtered over 1,400 people in southern Israel on October 7, has targeted, and killed, Hamas commanders and gunmen, as well as destroyed weapons warehouses, command and control centers, tunnels and numerous other assets that enable the terror organization to function.

But Hamas is deeply embedded in Gaza’s civilian infrastructure, a situation that creates severe complications for the IDF.

Explosions illuminate the sky during Israeli strikes on Gaza City on October 10, 2023. (MAHMUD HAMS / AFP)

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Alongside the blows dealt to Hamas, the army operation, dubbed Swords of Iron, has resulted in heavy casualties in Gaza, reportedly including large numbers of civilians. It has done severe damage to civilian infrastructure, with some neighborhoods undergoing catastrophic destruction.

The questions as to whether the Israeli army is acting lawfully will therefore continue to surface, and with greater intensity, together with the poisonous debate this issue raises on [social media](https://www.timesofisrael.com/x-takes-down-hundreds-of-accounts-with-hamas-ties-flags-content/), [university campuses](https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-israel-fights-back-after-hamas-massacre-us-colleges-firms-take-flak-over-responses/), and elsewhere across the globe. Already, [violent pro-Palestinian demonstrations](https://www.timesofisrael.com/historic-synagogue-in-tunisia-heavily-damaged-in-rioting-tied-to-israel-hamas-war/) have occurred in some countries alongside [a spike](https://www.timesofisrael.com/global-task-force-against-antisemitism-warns-of-danger-ahead-due-to-israel-hamas-war/) in global antisemitism

First, a few structural notes. The laws of armed conflict, also known as international humanitarian law, are governed primarily by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their additional protocols, including Protocol I which sets out the laws governing the protection of civilians, as well as customary international law.

Israel, along with all other states, is a party to the Geneva Conventions. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which provides protection to noncombatants under the terms of the Geneva Conventions, lists “Palestine” as a signatory party as well, meaning that both sides to this war are bound by the laws of armed conflict.

The International Criminal Court based in the Hague can prosecute serious violations of the Geneva Conventions that amount to war crimes, based on complaints submitted by international organizations, individuals, or parties to the court. The court itself can initiate examinations and investigations into possible violations of the laws of armed conflict.

The Palestinian Authority accepted the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2015, although Israel has not ratified the Rome Statute which established the ICC. Israel has, however, responded to allegations of war crimes submitted to the court by the Palestinian Authority against it.

Understanding the IDF’s codes of practice, the steps it takes to avoid civilian casualties, and circumstantial evidence from the war can paint a general picture as to the legality of the Israeli army’s operations.

### A democracy, governed by the rule of law

Israel declared war in response to the early morning October 7 invasion by Hamas terrorists in which they broke through the border fence under cover of thousands of rockets fired at Israel and rampaged murderously through southern communities, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and taking over 220 hostages into Gaza.

Entire families in their homes were among the victims, some of whom were burnt alive. Rapes, torture and other mutilations accompanied the slaughter. Some 260 people were mown down with gunfire and grenades at an outdoor music festival.

According to unverified numbers from the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza, believed to include its own terrorists, over 5,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel Defense Forces attacks since Israel began bombarding the Strip ahead of an expected ground offensive, with the declared aim of toppling and eradicating the terror group that rules the Strip.

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Determining whether the laws of armed conflict are being honored or violated while a war is raging, and when information about the circumstances of IDF strikes cannot be obtained, is incredibly difficult.



Gazans help the injured in Israeli airstrikes, October 10, 2023. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

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Screenshot of Hamas bodycam footage as terrorists approach an Israeli vehicle during the terror organization’s October 7 attack in southern Israel, released by the IDF and GPO. (Screenshot)

One crucial factor in understanding the overall legal context of the IDF’s operations is that Israel is a democratic country, meaning it is governed by the rule of law and its army’s campaigns are ultimately subject to review by Israeli courts.

Operations are conducted upon the direction of the government, specifically the security cabinet, and are overseen by the justice system, including the attorney general and the IDF’s military advocate general. All the IDF’s operations are governed by international law, and IDF orders include a requirement to abide by the Geneva Conventions.

As laid out on the IDF’s [official website (Hebrew)](https://www.idf.il/%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%A8%D7%99-%D7%99%D7%97%D7%99%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/%D7%94%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A7%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%98%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A6%D7%91%D7%90%D7%99%D7%AA/%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%9C%D7%A7%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%91%D7%99%D7%9F-%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%99/) and supported by comments made on background by experts in the field, the IDF itself provides its soldiers and commanders with education and training in international law through the Military Advocate General’s Corps (MAG Corps) School of Military Law.

In addition, the MAG Corps International Law Department provides the IDF with operational advice at various levels of command on international law in terms of what can and cannot be targeted, what weaponry is lawful, who may be detained, how such people can be held, and advice on humanitarian operations in the civilian population.

During times of war, the MAG Corps activates an operational law apparatus of military lawyers and lawyers in the IDF reserves who provide advice to operational forces and other units, including those in charge of humanitarian affairs.

The head of the MAG Corps, the military advocate general, is appointed by the defense minister in coordination with the IDF chief of staff but is professionally independent and subject only to the law.

The MAG Corps is subject to two levels of oversight. The first is the attorney general, who provides international law advice to the government including in times of conflict. The second is the Supreme Court, which may hear petitions against the MAG’s decisions and policies.

Allegations of violations of international law during hostilities are examined and investigated by independent military and civilian bodies, including police and prosecutors. Their decisions are also subject to review by the civil justice system and the Supreme Court.

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### Military targets among civilian infrastructure

Pnina Sharvit Baruch, who served as the head of the MAG International Law Department between 2003 and 2009, insists that the IDF only attacks military targets. She noted, however, that these may include residential buildings that are used by Hamas and other terror groups.

Because such buildings are being used for military purposes, they become lawful targets, says Sharvit Baruch, as laid out in treaties governing the laws of armed conflict such as Additional Protocol I Geneva Conventions and customary international law.

Hamas’s military capabilities are deeply entrenched within Gaza’s civilian infrastructure, and indeed underneath it in a vast network of tunnels, making the task of eliminating its military threat to Israel — as is Israel’s stated goal — without harming civilians extremely difficult.

Difficult, but not necessarily illegal.

### The principle of proportionality: Not a numbers game

One issue of critical importance here is that of proportionality, a concept that is very often misunderstood and misconstrued in a simplistic manner by looking at Israeli casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, and comparing them to those of the Palestinians.

Under the laws of armed conflict, an attack is considered disproportionate, and therefore illegal, “if the anticipated collateral damage to civilians and civilian objects would be excessive in relation to the military advantage expected from the attack,” says Sharvit Baruch, who now works as a researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

This means that if an attack would provide the IDF with a significant military advantage, such as taking out a Hamas commander, a key weapons facility, or similar, it could be legal even if it were deemed likely to cause civilian casualties, even heavy ones.

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Every individual attack has to be proportionate in this manner in order to be legal.

That said, the circumstances of a given war and the nature of the enemy has a bearing on how the concept of “military advantage” is determined, says Sharvit Baruch.

In the wake of its terror onslaught and the atrocities it committed on October 7, Hamas can justifiably be considered to be more dangerous and ruthless in terms of its paramilitary capabilities and its willingness to harm Israeli civilians and [commit war crimes](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-actions-are-war-crimes-could-constitute-genocide-international-law-experts/) than it was previously thought to be.

In such a light, the military advantage of killing a Hamas operative, destroying a command and control center, or attacking other targets can be given greater weight in the proportionality equation, meaning that the legally tolerable level of harm to civilians is also higher, says Sharvit Baruch.

“In my view, even if many civilians are killed, even in an excessive manner, it is not necessarily illegal, even if it is unfortunate,” she said.

Dr. Aurel Sari, an associate professor of Public International Law at the University of Exeter in the UK, points out another crucial point, that proportionality cannot be assessed on the basis of hindsight, but must be assessed on the basis of information that was available to the military commander at the time of the attack and prior to it.

“If it turns out that your information was wrong, that a weapon malfunctioned, or other unforeseen circumstances occurred that led to higher civilian casualties than originally anticipated, that is not a violation of the law,” said Sari, who also lectures and consults on international conflict law for NATO and the US and British militaries.

He said that in general terms, “The IDF is a professional force that adheres to the law of armed conflict,” and pointed to the quality legal advice it receives through the MAG Corps to help it comply with such laws.

### Ramping up the level of force

Sari did, however, express concern over some aspects of the IDF’s campaign.

“We have witnessed the very extensive destruction of residential areas in Gaza through aerial bombardment,” Sari said, although he noted that there were “undoubtedly” many “military objectives that are lawful military targets in Gaza” that the IDF may legally attack.

“However, given the sheer number of targets and the extensiveness of the destruction, questions have been raised whether all of the attacks are in fact directed against lawful military objectives. In a similar vein, there has been concern over the very high levels of incidental harm to civilians and whether this complies with the rule of proportionality,”

ari also said he believed the amount of ordinance, the pace of operations, and the number of sorties being conducted in the current campaign to be higher than in previous IDF campaigns in the Gaza Strip.

“It could be that all of this is directed against military targets and that in every case the demands of proportionality are being satisfied, but looking at the tempo of the operations, it appears difficult to sustain that.”

Sari acknowledged, however, that without access to the information possessed by the IDF and its commanders, it was impossible to know for certain.

Sharvit Baruch agreed that the IDF has increased the level of force it is using compared to previous conflicts with Hamas in Gaza, and said that “the level of destruction and the level of casualties are much higher than before.”

But she argued this was because the threat level is now much higher, contending that Hamas constitutes an existential threat to Israeli citizens in the Gaza border region and the country as a whole, especially when taken in combination with the threat posed by Hezbollah on Israel’s northern border and Iranian threats against Israel.

“Factually, Israel is operating with more force but that is because the circumstances demand it and in my view, it is legally justified to use more force because the level of the threat is so much greater.”

Similarly, in an article published on October 17, Benjamin Wittes, the editor in chief of the Lawfare publication and a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, wrote that it would be “a grave analytic and legal error to conflate an apparently large number of Palestinian civilian casualties in Gaza with war crimes.”

Wittes wrote that although some strikes “may be war crimes to the extent the civilian death was the result of intentional targeting,” other incidents in which Palestinian civilians have been killed “may reflect mere error, bad intelligence, or collateral damage permissible under the laws of war.”

On the same note, Sari said the proportionality calculation “is not a numbers game,” explaining for example that the military advantage of killing a senior Hamas commander could be deemed to justify incidental harm to a larger number of civilians than killing a Hamas foot soldier.

### Israel’s warnings to evacuate northern Gaza

Another factor with crucial bearing on the legality of a military strike that might harm civilians is the requirement to take feasible precautions to minimize such harm, said Sharvit Baruch.

Such precautions include warning the civilian population, although there is no legal obligation to warn of every attack. In previous rounds of conflict with Hamas, the IDF has issued specific warnings of impending strikes, but in the current operation, it has abandoned this practice in favor of general warnings to civilians to leave an area.

This is another example of how the nature of the IDF’s operations is different in the current conflict from that of previous rounds of fighting.

Sharvit Baruch insisted, however, that this is lawful, and pointed to IDF claims that Hamas has stopped some residents from heeding the Israeli army’s warnings and evacuating northern Gaza, even putting up roadblocks.

For the past two weeks, the IDF has [warned residents](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-warns-civilians-to-leave-northern-gaza-as-ground-invasion-looms/) of northern Gaza, with a population of approximately 1.1 million people, to evacuate to the southern part of the territory for safety during airstrikes and the looming ground offensive.

Those warnings, however, have been heavily criticized by some, including the United Nations, Amnesty International, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The ICRC said the warnings were “not compatible with international humanitarian law” when taken together with Israel’s decision to drastically cut the amount of water it supplies to Gaza and prevent the transfer of essential supplies.

“When military powers order people to leave their homes, all possible measures must be taken to ensure the population has access to basic necessities like food and water and that members of the same family are not separated,” the organization said.

Amnesty International charged that the IDF statements and leaflet drops on northern Gaza “cannot be considered an effective warning” and that they “may amount to forced displacement of the civilian population, a violation of international humanitarian law.”

Writing on the Articles of War website on October 15, Michael Schmitt, a professor of Public International Law at the University of Reading and a scholar at the US Military Academy at West Point, took issue with Amnesty International’s claims and said the assessments of the IDF’s warnings needed to evaluate the available options.

The alternatives are either “an urban assault into an area full of civilians” or “an evacuation into a place that is not fully prepared to accommodate them.”

Wrote Schmitt, “Regardless of the lawfulness of Israel’s siege-like actions, the simple fact is that civilians who head south will be safer.”

It was, therefore, “bewildering,” he said, “that humanitarian organizations are not encouraging the civilian population to move away from what will be a destructive and deadly urban battle.”

As to the claims of forced displacement, Schmitt noted that the ICRC’s own rules say that “displacement” is legal if the security of civilians requires evacuation, adding that “it is not only permissible to move civilians when their safety can be enhanced but also a requirement when feasible.”

Wittes likewise rejected the criticism of Israel’s warnings, saying that the IDF could not be criticized for attacking Hamas in Gaza amid the presence of hundreds of thousands of civilians and at the same time be banned from having those civilians move away to avoid harming them.

### The siege of Gaza

He was critical, however, of aspects of Israel’s siege on Gaza, saying that cutting off water was “indefensible.”

Likewise, Sari said that although siege warfare is not an unlawful method of warfare as such, Israel’s decision to cut the water supply and withhold the transfer of essential items “is difficult to justify – and if it cannot be justified, it is not lawful.”

On October 9, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declared that there would be “no electricity, no food, no fuel” going into Gaza, and Israel imposed a total siege on the territory that day. Supply of some water was restarted on October 15, while the entry into Gaza of general humanitarian aid has also begun again, albeit in a limited way.

The war in Gaza and the operation being conducted by the IDF in the territory is highly complex in terms of the challenges facing Israel’s armed forces to eliminate Hamas’s military capabilities while avoiding harm to civilians and thereby complying with the laws of armed conflict.

There are numerous facets to the operation, each of which has its own legal obligations and concerns. Given how deeply Hamas is embedded and ensconced within Gaza’s civilian population, and given the severe threat it poses to Israeli civilians and the country’s national security as a whole, making correct decisions in every aspect of this war is very difficult.

Sari contends, though, that it Israel must try its utmost to do so in order to live up to its own values, preserve its moral legitimacy, and ultimately maintain the backing of its allies.

“Complying with international law is mandatory, but such compliance also reflects the values and principles of Israel as a democracy and distinguishes it from its adversaries,” Sari said.

“In addition, compliance with international law is also in Israel’s interest, as it will be critical to maintain the international backing it has received,” he said.

Standing on rubble under the blackened façade of her apartment building in Netivot, Liora Touito watches neighbors load two suitcases into a car.

The site took a rocket hit that killed three neighbors and torched Touito’s yard.

The mother of four would have liked to join the stream of locals who have temporarily left this city of 35,000 residents situated only 11 kilometers (seven miles) from the Gaza border. But Touito is so strapped for cash that she can’t even accept the offers to host her for free courtesy of municipalities and private citizens who are putting up the temporarily displaced

“The 10th approaches,” she said on Sunday, referencing the date when her credit card bill is due. “I work at a supermarket, and I barely make ends meet as it is. If I don’t work, I can’t pay rent or feed the kids.”

At least 1,300 Israelis have died in the ongoing hostilities with Hamas in Gaza, most of them during a shock incursion by some 1,500 terrorists who on October 7 murdered Israelis en masse, perpetrating atrocities that have shocked the world. Israel has unleashed its artillery and air force on Gaza, killing at least 2,000 people according to Palestinian sources, amid anticipation of a ground invasion to destroy Gaza’s Hamas rulers

Touito’s predicament is not uncommon for how the poverty of many in the battered cities of the western Negev has compounded their suffering during the region’s 22 years under threat from Gaza rockets. Yet these challenges have neither stopped the city’s growth nor broken many locals’ spirit and faithThe death of Touito’s neighbors – Raphael Fahimi, his son-in-law Netanel Maskelchi and Maskelchi’s 14-year-old son, Raphael Meir Maskelchi – may have had something to do with poverty, too, Touito says.

“Because of thefts, many here keep butane tanks for cooking in their balconies instead of outside. The rocket ignited the butane. That’s what killed them,” said Touito, whose eldest daughter is suffering from PTSD

The building where the rocket hit has a shelter but it’s unusable because the residents have turned it into a storage place.

“People have large families here and they store and hoard for years things like furniture and mattresses to avoid having to buy new,” Touito explains. “I want them to clear the shelter but they won’t listen to me.”

Touito and her children sleep at her boyfriend’s home, which has a shelter

Netivot, where the average monthly salary of about NIS 9,500 ($2,380) is roughly 30% lower than the national figure, has some more affluent neighborhoods composed of semi-detached houses and modern apartment buildings. Unlike the projects in the city’s center, the fancier neighborhoods have emptied out, according to Aviel Zaguri, a 27-year-old father of four.People in richer neighborhoods tend to have relatives who can host them, cars to get to work with, or jobs they can do remotely. “It’s pretty empty in the nicer neighborhoods,” Zaguri said while standing in the city’s dusty center, which has been echoing for days with the thuds of ballistic launches on both sides of the Gaza border.

Thousands of people from Sderot, Ofakim, Netivot, Ashkelon and beyond have left their homes amid the countless Hamas rocket attacks that have pummeled Israel over the past nine days, killing several people.

ome Netivot residents say the city enjoys divine protection as it’s the burial place of Yoram Michael Abargel, a rabbi who died in 2015. He is revered by thousands of disciples who pray regularly at a synagogue in his memory built near his grave. Even now, it draws pilgrims and worshipers at all hours.

So does the Netivot grave of Israel Abuhatzeira, better known as the Baba Sali, a Morocco-born rabbi whose followers say he performed miracles before his 1984 death.

**“Netivot could have easily had a situation like they had in Ofakim,” Yehuda Oshert, 57, said. He was referencing the slaying on October 7 of dozens of residents in a nearby city. “But the saintly sages confused the terrorists who wanted to enter Netivot and [protected] us,” Oshert, a father of three, added.**

**Oshert and his wife are staying out of principle. “I’ve never folded, never left, never ceded an inch to those animals, and I’m not about to start now,” he said defiantly**

**Netivot, which is surrounded by kibbutzim and moshavim, underlines the juxtaposition of what some call “first and second Israel” — the predominantly Ashkenazi, cultural elite and the largely Sephardic, underprivileged urbanites. The divide extends to the religious and political realms, with “second Israel” being more devout than the other group and generally likelier to vote for right-wing, religious parties.**

**The 10-month-long wave of protests against the right-wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has accentuated those divides. But the terrorist attack of October 7 has “set aside” those differences, Oshert said, reflecting the mindset of many on both sides of the internal divide.**

**“This is a sign that divided, we will fall,” he said. “When I pray at the gravesite [of Abargel] I pray for everyone: Tel Aviv folks, Netivot folks, even kibbutzniks,” he said with a wink, referencing the stereotype of the staunch secularism in that demographic.**

**Yet the differences linger, and they are being revisited even as families from across Israel — first and second — bury their dead and prepare for a long and deadly war.**

**Rachel Edery, a woman from Ofakim who became a national** [**icon**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-ofakim-one-womans-graceful-bravery-offers-precious-solace-to-a-grieving-nation/) **for how she used her instinct for hospitality to survive being taken hostage with her husband by five Hamas terrorists, verbalized what many have been thinking.**

**“We were punished by God. They disrupted the prayers of Jews on Yom Kippur, like savages. So we got savagery paid back one hundred times over,” she told a neighbor, referencing a** [**row over public Orthodox worship in Tel Aviv**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/annual-yom-kippur-mass-prayer-tests-the-limits-of-tel-avivs-vaunted-liberalism/) **that had polarized Israeli society in the days leading up to the attack.**

**Survivors on the other side of the political debate are also politicizing the tragedy.**

**“Where are all the people who called us traitors?” Sofie Berzon MacKie, a survivor from Kibbutz Be’eri, an epicenter of the wholesale murder of Israelis during the Hamas terror onslaught, asked in an interview on Channel 12 on Wednesday**

**“We the leftists are the traitors?” she asked, repeating a frequent slur used against the anti-judicial overhaul protesters and leftists in general. “They are the traitors, the people whose salaries I pay and left me to die,” Berzon MacKie, an artist who was born in the United Kingdom, said as she cried.**

**Back in Netivot, Aviel Zaguri is staying put. He didn’t flinch as inbound rockets that hit a few miles from Netivot send loud thuds across the plains of the western Negev. He stood at sunset outside his yeshiva and looked up at the spectacle that lit up the desert sky over Netivot each night: Iron Dome rounds hunting and destroying rockets bound for the area’s Israeli towns.**

**“My wife thought about going to Jerusalem, but we decided it’s not much safer. And frankly, it’s such a hassle moving in with relatives when you have four small kids that staying under fire feels easier.”**

**Zaguri’s children are accustomed to the alarms and the thuds, he said. “We’ve raised our children into this. Our twins, age 5, asked what the thuds are. I told them: Arabs in Gaza want to kill us but God will watch over us if we watch over ourselves and His commandments.**

UNITED NATIONS — The UN Security Council delayed until Tuesday morning a vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution calling for a halt to hostilities in Gaza that would allow for urgently needed aid deliveries to reach a massive number of civilians as members intensified negotiations to try to avoid another veto by the United States.

The council said Monday’s vote, which had been scheduled for 5 p.m., would not take place, and diplomats said negotiations were taking place to get the United States, Israel’s closest ally, to abstain or vote “yes” on the resolution.

The draft on the table Monday morning called for an “urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities” for humanitarian access to deliver aid. But this language is expected to be watered down to a “suspension” of hostilities or something possibly weaker to satisfy the Americans, the diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity because discussions have been private

The US [vetoed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-vetoes-un-security-council-resolution-demanding-immediate-gaza-ceasefire/) a Security Council resolution on December 8 that was backed by almost all council members and dozens of other nations demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on December 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

The importance of a Security Council resolution is that it is legally binding, but in practice, many parties choose to ignore the council’s requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, but they are a significant barometer of world opinion

A key issue is how to implement and sustain a desperately needed aid operation. Human Rights Watch [accused Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/human-rights-watch-claims-israel-starving-gaza-civilians-as-a-method-of-warfare/) on Monday of deliberately starving Gaza’s population by blocking the delivery of water, food, and fuel, a method of warfare that it described as a war crime. Israel responded by describing HRW as having “no moral basis to talk about what’s going on in Gaza” as the rights group did not condemn the massacre by the Hamas terror group that provoked the current war.

The United Nations’ food agency reported on December 14 that 56 percent of Gaza’s households were experiencing “severe levels of hunger,” up from 38% two weeks earlier

The draft resolution that was being considered by the 15 council members on Monday recognizes that civilians in Gaza don’t have access to sufficient food, water, sanitation, electricity, telecommunications, and medical services “essential for their survival.” Also, it would express the council’s “strong concern for the disproportionate effect that the conflict is having on the lives and well-being of children, women, and other civilians in vulnerable situations.”

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Israel launched its war on Hamas following the terror group’s murderous onslaught on southern Israel on October 7, in which 3,000 terrorists slaughtered some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, amid acts of brutality including rapes, and took another approximately 240 people hostage, more than 100 of whom it is still holding captive.

The Hamas-run Gaza health ministry says more than 19,000 people in the Strip have been killed in the ensuing operation. The Gaza death toll cannot be independently verified and also includes those killed in failed Palestinian rocket launches. The IDF says it has killed over 7,000 Hamas operatives in Gaza.

Israel says it makes every effort to avoid civilian casualties. But it points to the Hamas practice of locating military infrastructure — rocket launchers, weapons stores, command centers — next to, inside and underneath residential buildings, hospitals, schools and mosques.

The proposed Security Council resolution reiterates its demand that all parties comply with international humanitarian law, especially protecting civilians and the infrastructure critical for their survival including hospitals, schools, places of worship, and UN facilities.

The draft, obtained by The Associated Press, demands the parties to the conflict — Hamas and Israel — fulfill their obligations under international humanitarian law and enable “the immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale directly to the Palestinian civilian population throughout the Gaza Strip.”

It “calls for an urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access” in Gaza and also “firmly condemns all violations of international humanitarian law, including all indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects, all violence and hostilities against civilians, and all acts of terrorism.”

The draft also demands the immediate and unconditional release of all Hamas-held hostages.The draft confirms its “unwavering commitment to the vision of the two-state solution,” and stresses “the importance of unifying the Gaza Strip with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority.”

The draft is being negotiated by the United Arab Emirates, which is the Arab representative on the Security Council, and requests that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres establish an expeditious mechanism to monitor all humanitarian shipments to Gaza by land, sea, and air.

In a letter sent on Monday to the president of the Security Council, seen by AFP, Guterres mentions three options for implementing a November 15 resolution calling for humanitarian “pauses” of a few days to allow aid into the Palestinian territory.

Noting that “the conditions for the effective delivery of humanitarian aid no longer exist,” the secretary general’s first option is to reinforce the presence of UN humanitarian personnel on the ground to enable a “more robust United Nations presence on the ground.”

Secondly, he suggests a mission of the UN or third-party civilian observers.

And finally, to monitor the observance of “humanitarian pauses/cease-fires, United Nations unarmed military observers could be deployed,” he wrote, noting that all three options would require “clear mandates” from the Security Council.

Since the start of the war between Israel and Hamas, the Security Council has been under fire, having only managed to adopt a text calling for “humanitarian pauses” in mid-NovemberFive other draft resolutions were rejected, two of them due to US vetoes.

US President Joe Biden has since exhibited growing impatience with Israel, warning that its ally risks losing the support of the international community for its “indiscriminate” bombardment of the Gaza Strip, while at same time Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, on a visit to Israel this week, assured Israeli officials that the US would not dictate the “timelines or terms” of the war.

The Biden administration declined to say how it viewed the latest Security Council resolution text.

“We are always trying to get to a place where there’s language that we agree with, that other Security Council members agree with,” US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters.

“But right now we’re in the middle of the negotiation process. I wouldn’t want to speculate.”

Israel has already insisted that a long-term ceasefire is unacceptable, as it would leave Hamas still in charge of Gaza and still holding the hostages it abducted from Israel.

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israel and the United States agree on how the Israel-Hamas war started — with the Gaza-ruling terror group’s savage October 7 massacres in southern Israel. They agree on how it should end — with the elimination of Hamas.

But there are differences over how to get there, which are becoming more pronounced.

On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden openly criticized Israel’s conduct in the war.

“Israel’s security can rest on the United States, but right now it has more than the United States,” Biden said at a fundraiser at a Washington hotel convened by Lee “Rosy” Rosenberg, a major donor to Democrats and pro-Israel causes. “It has the European Union, it has Europe, it has most of the world,” he said. “But they’re starting to lose that support by indiscriminate bombing that takes place.”

Over 18,000 Gazans have been killed so far in the fighting, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry — a figure that cannot be verified and includes terrorists as well as civilians killed by errant Palestinian rocket fire. Israel says it has killed 7,000 Hamas operatives.

Over 1,200 people were killed in Israel on October 7, most of them civilians, when thousands of Hamas-led terrorists stormed the border and launched a murder and torture spree with monstrous brutality, raping women and girls, mutilating corpses and burning entire families alive. The terrorists abducted roughly 240 more people, taking them as hostages to the Gaza Strip.

The massacre led to Israel’s current military campaign, in which 115 IDF troops have so far been killed.

But there are stark differences between Israel and the United States over what happens the day after the war ends. Does Israel stay in the Gaza Strip? If so, for how long? And who takes its place?

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“Yes, there is disagreement about ‘the day after Hamas,’ and I hope that we will reach agreement here as well,” Netanyahu said Tuesday in a statement, describing what he called an “intensive dialogue” he had just completed with Biden.

Netanyahu made clear what the differences are: Biden has pushed for the Palestinian Authority — which governs Palestinian population centers in the West Bank — to [take control of Gaza](https://apnews.com/article/biden-revitalized-palestinian-authority-israel-hamas-war-bf8defe81079d6e6371f228157f9be10). Netanyahu rejected that idea, referencing the Oslo Accords, the 1993 agreement that created the PA, which is led by the Fatah Party.

“I will not allow Israel to repeat the mistake of Oslo,” Netanyahu said. He referenced longstanding Israeli complaints about the PA: that it glorifies violence against Israelis and pays stipends to convicted Palestinian terrorists in Israeli prisons.

“After the great sacrifice of our civilians and our soldiers, I will not allow the entry into Gaza of those who educate for terrorism, support terrorism and finance terrorism,” he said. “Gaza will be neither Hamastan nor Fatahstan.”

Netanyahu has [said Israel will retain security control of the Gaza Strip](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-idf-will-control-gaza-after-war-rejects-notion-of-international-force/) after the war, though he has not elaborated on who will govern its day-to-day affairs or how long the Israeli security presence would last. That’s frustrating the Biden administration, said David Makovsky, a fellow with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy think tank, which has ties with the Israeli and US governments.

“The Americans want to know, like, OK, you have a military strategy. I get that. And maybe a very reasonable one, but tell me how it leads to political outcomes? The outcome is no Hamas. Okay. That’s good. That’s necessary. But is it sufficient?’”

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Here’s a look at the outcomes the United States, Israel and other actors are talking about.

**Will the Palestinian Authority govern Gaza?**

The Biden administration, for several weeks after Hamas’s massacre, talked about bringing the Palestinian Authority into the Gaza Strip.

“We must also work on the affirmative elements to get to a sustained peace,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in Tokyo during a summit of the G7 industrial giants on November 8. “These must include the Palestinian people’s voices and aspirations at the center of post-crisis governance in Gaza. It must include Palestinian-led governance and Gaza unified with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority.”

Netanyahu has emphatically counted out any PA role in the Gaza Strip, pointing to its continued payments to the families of jailed and killed terrorists and what he says is continued incitement in its textbooks and media.

That may explain why Blinken has been more circumspect in recent statements, in which he has envisioned the establishment of an independent Palestinian state uniting Gaza and the West Bank but hasn’t named the Palestinian Authority.

“When the major military operation is over, this is not over, because we have to have a durable, sustainable peace, and we have to make sure that we’re on the path to a durable, sustainable peace,” Blinken said Sunday on CNN’s State of the Union. “From our perspective, I think from the perspective of many around the world, that has to lead to a Palestinian state.”

Netanyahu is not the only obstacle to such an outcome. Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, is not too eager to be seen as assuming control of the Gaza Strip on the heels of an Israeli invasion. Polls show that Abbas, who hasn’t run in (or won) an election in nearly two decades, has low approval ratings among Palestinians.

“I will not return on top of an Israeli tank,” [the Associated Press quoted Abbas as telling his confidants last month.](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-11-1-2023-blinken-netanyahu-d57766fd8e55500ff6f16b78b3560d51)

The PA itself is seen as corrupt and weakened by decades of cooperating with Israeli security measures in the parts of the West Bank it governs. Some major West Bank cities, such as Jenin, are home to large concentrations of militant groups.

But a [paper published this week](https://israelpolicyforum.org/starting-from-the-ground-up-u-s-policy-options-for-post-hamas-gaza/) by Israel Policy Forum (IPF) scholars Michael Koplow and Shira Efron says the end of the war is an opportunity for Israel to expand its relationship with the PA — and demand that it undergo reforms that address Israel’s concerns. IPF has long advocated for a two-state solution.

“Despite hopes to the contrary, no other players in the international community are willing to entertain long-term commitments to Gaza, let alone ruling the Strip, leaving the PA as the only viable option,” Efron and Koplow write.

**Will Netanyahu preserve his hardline coalition?**

Efron and Koplow added, however, that Netanyahu is rejecting cooperation with the PA in Gaza because of pressure from far-right parties in his coalition. Those parties, they said, wield an “absolute veto” over strengthening the PA.

Regarding Netanyahu’s political interests, Makovsky was blunter.

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“He can’t say the word ‘PA’ — he can’t say it,” Makovsky said. “If the government seems completely shut down over being able to talk about the day after, that’s a function of the politics.”

On Tuesday, Biden appeared to suggest that it was time for Netanyahu to cut off his far-right partners, whom the president has long reviled.

“Bibi’s got a tough decision to make,” he said at the fundraising event, using Netanyahu’s nickname. “This is the most conservative government in Israel’s history,” that “doesn’t want a two-state solution.”

He appeared to hope Netanyahu might bring in the center-left opposition and drop the far-right. That’s not going to happen as long as the latter is ready to keep Netanyahu in office and shield him from the political consequences of the October 7 onslaught, said Nimrod Novik, another IPF scholar and a member of the executive committee of Commanders for Israel Security, which also favors a two-state outcome.

“The longer [the war] is, the farther the trauma of October 7,” Novilk said. “The longer it is, the farther the investigations of the responsibility for it all. Maybe people will forget, maybe something good will happen and he’ll get credit for it.”

Jonathan Schanzer, a vice president with the right-leaning Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said Netanyahu had every incentive to pursue the war until victory somewhat repairs his legacy shattered by October 7.

“He said ‘everybody will have to give answers’ [about what went wrong] when the war is over,” Schanzer said. “And he’s hoping that he can postpone that discussion until such a time that events on the ground will have swung in his favor.”

**Will Israel reoccupy Gaza?**

Although Netanyahu has discussed maintaining control of security in Gaza, he has not yet said the word “occupation”: For one thing, it would set off a firestorm at home. Before Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, many Israelis remember weeks of military reserve duty spent occupying the dangerous strip of land, and the costs it incurred in lives and resources.

For another, the Biden administration has said indefinite Israeli occupation of Gaza is not an option.



IDF soldiers fighting in Gaza pose with a sign that reads: ‘Gush Katif: Returning Home.’ (Aviel Tucker)

At the G7 summit in Tokyo last month, Blinken rejected every possible iteration of occupation that has apparently bubbled up under consideration by Netanyahu, according to leaks to the Israeli media. These include resettlement of Israelis in Gaza, military occupation, “buffer zones” that Israel would control along Gaza’s border, a return to blockading the strip — which was the status in place until October 6 — and the removal of a portion of the Palestinians, an action that would bolster charges of ethnic cleansing against Israel.

“The only way to ensure that this crisis never happens again is to begin setting the conditions for durable peace and security, and to frame our diplomatic efforts now with that in mind,” Blinken said. “The United States believes key elements should include no forcible displacement of Palestinians from Gaza — not now, not after the war. No use of Gaza as a platform for terrorism or other violent attacks.  No reoccupation of Gaza after the conflict ends. No attempt to blockade or besiege Gaza. No reduction in the territory of Gaza.”

Many Palestinian commentators have focused their attention on the Gaza death toll over the past two months. But Diana Buttu, a former Palestinian negotiator, [wrote in The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/12/opinion/gaza-israel-palestinians-plans.html) on Tuesday that an ongoing Israeli occupation of Gaza would be the worst possible option.

“The future of Gaza — like that of the West Bank — is for Palestinians to decide,” she wrote. “That is the essence of self-determination. The international community must not continue to place Israel first, as has been done for decades.”

She added, “Palestinians must live freely, without the faintest sense of an Israeli noose around our necks.”

**Will Israel’s Arab partners play a role in Gaza’s future?**

Blinken has shuttled between Arab capitals for weeks seeking buy-in for the postwar scenario. But in public comments after meeting foreign ministers from Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as a Palestinian Authority senior official, he was vague about what that scenario involves — beyond expressing hope for a Palestinian state.

Behind the scenes, [reports have said](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/watch-blinken-meets-with-arab-leaders-to-discuss-gazas-future-amid-tensions-over-israel-hamas-war), he has been more explicit, seeking pledges of funding for whatever form the government of Gaza takes after the war. He has also weighed asking Arab countries to commit troops to Gaza to help maintain the peace.

Arab states, [which have been calling for a ceasefire,](https://www.reuters.com/world/blinken-says-discussed-future-gaza-with-arab-foreign-ministers-2023-12-01/) have not bitten at that offer, for myriad reasons: They, like Israel, distrust Abbas, who has gained a reputation for corruption and fecklessness. And while four Arab states have normalized relations with Israel in recent years, they are not ready to join with it in a military effort to keep Gaza calm.

According to [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?mod=middle-east_news_article_pos2), the United Arab Emirates, which has cultivated increasingly close ties with Israel in recent years, said it would help with the reconstruction of Gaza only if there’s progress toward a two-state solution.

“We need to see a viable two-state solution plan, a road map that is serious before we talk about the next day and rebuilding the infrastructure of Gaza,” said the Emirati ambassador to the United Nations, Lana Nusseibeh.

In their paper, Efron and Koplow propose a US-led rehabilitation of Gaza that melds Arab buy-in with reconstituting the Palestinian Authority in the territory. Preparing for that future, they wrote, needs to begin even as the fighting is ongoing.

“Stabilizing Gaza, resuming necessary services, rebuilding infrastructure, and preventing the return of Hamas — assuming that Israel is successful in removing it from effective power — will require a concerted effort from multiple stakeholders: Israel, the Palestinians, Middle Eastern countries, the international community, and particularly the United States,” said the paper.

Ghaith al-Omari, a former adviser to Palestinian officials and a fellow at the Washington Institute, [told The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/12/03/palestinian-authority-gaza/) last week that bringing in the PA was a prerequisite to getting other Arab countries to play a role in postwar Gaza.

Arab nations, “to even be able to engage with us, they need that framing, the two-state solution framing and the transitional framing,” he told the Post. “Because this way they can always claim, ‘We’re doing this to support the Palestinians.’”

National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir on Monday demanded that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu add a minister to the three-person war cabinet, accusing those already on the panel overseeing the war against Hamas of having harbored misconceptions that enabled the terror group to carry out its devastating attack on October 7.

Ben Gvir demanded that the additional member not be from the premier’s Likud party or Benny Gantz’s National Unity, which left the opposition to join an emergency government in the wake of the Hamas assault that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, the vast majority of them civilians.

“As a member of the coalition, a senior minister in the government, and a member of the cabinet, I accepted your unilateral decision on the composition of the ‘narrow cabinet’ which does not include me — the national security minister,” the leader of the far-right Otzma Yehudit party wrote in a letter to Netanyahu.

“I do not intend to confront you on the matter, despite the fact that it is appropriate that the position of the huge number of voters who put their trust in us and asked us to represent them should be heard in the limited cabinet,” Ben Gvir wrote.

Five National Unity lawmakers joined Netanyahu’s cabinet shortly after the Hamas massacre and Israel’s subsequent declaration of war, forming a national emergency government meant to add decades of high-level security experience to the management of the war and temper far-right influence.

The war cabinet is made up of Netanyahu, Gantz and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Gantz is a former IDF chief of staff and defense minister, and Gallant a former commander of the IDF Southern Command.

National Unity MK Gadi Eisenkot, also a former IDF chief of staff, and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, a Netanyahu confidant, are observers to the cabinet.

Netanyahu’s coalition already included the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties, along with far-right Religious Zionism and Ben Gvir’s Otzma Yehudit.

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“I hereby demand that a member or even an observer be added to the cabinet,” Ben Gvir wrote, adding that Netanyahu should be the one to select the person.

He stipulated that the additional member of the war cabinet can be any coalition minister, “provided that another voice is heard, which is not part of the misconception we have been dragged into for years.”

Ben Gvir said that all the ministers currently on the war cabinet were part of what he termed the “concept camp,” those, he explained, “who for years claimed that Hamas was deterred, that payments to a terrorist organization would bring peace, those who fostered the policy of containment and sowed illusions that led to our current situation.”

Israel allowed Qatar to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars in cash delivered by hand to Hamas authorities, in order to alleviate the dire economic circumstances in the Strip.

Questions about the war cabinet were already raised when Shas party leader MK Aryeh Deri attended its first meeting days after the attack. Deri, who is not a minister after the High Court of Justice ruled he cannot hold such an office due to his past criminal convictions, was reportedly invited to attend by Netanyahu. The move was said to draw anger from other ministers who were not included. Netanyahu reportedly explained that Deri’s presence was a one-off for just that meeting as it covered issues in which he had some experience, according to the Kan public broadcaster.

Ben Gvir has had a rocky relationship with the security establishment despite his ministry overseeing the police force. He was [repeatedly left out](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ben-gvir-again-excluded-from-top-level-security-meeting/) of top-level security meetings in the past, with insider sources telling media it was because he would disrupt the gatherings with unhelpful hardline suggestions. There were also reportedly concerns that Ben Gvir, whom critics accuse of seeking media attention, would leak details of meetings compromising sensitive operations.

Ben Gvir’s assignation of blame for the catastrophic Hamas assault in part to Netanyahu came after several senior defense officials have publicly assumed responsibility for the security failures that enabled Hamas to send over 2,500 gunmen across the heavily guarded border with Gaza into Israel and rampage for hours, overrunning communities and army posts, and slaughtering men, women, and children. In addition, at least 222 people, including the elderly, parents with young children, and babies, were abducted and dragged back to Gaza as captives.

The attack came under cover of a barrage of thousands of rockets at towns and cities across Israel. Hamas has kept up the rocket attacks on central and southern Israel. Some 200,000 people have been displaced as they flee the attacks.

Israel responded by vowing to destroy Hamas and began intensive strikes on terror targets in Gaza ahead of an expected ground invasion.

Last week the head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, Maj. Gen Aharon Haliva, said he [bears responsibility](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-intel-chief-says-he-bears-full-responsibility-for-not-warning-of-hamas-attack/) for intelligence failures that did not warn of the assault. He followed the head of the Shin Bet security agency and IDF chief of staff, who made similar remarks in the preceding days.

A handful of ministers have acknowledged and taken responsibility for the failures that contributed to the Hamas onslaught, including Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, Education Minister Yoav Kisch and Culture and Sports Minister Miki Zohar.

National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi admitted the government “did not fulfill our mission.”

Pressed about the question of Netanyahu, who has served as prime minister for 12 of the past 15 years, taking direct responsibility for the situation, Hanegbi said, “The moment will come when everyone will deal with it, former and current prime ministers, army chiefs, defense ministers.”

The Ynet outlet reported Monday that there are two ministers who are reconsidering their positions within the government due to a sense of responsibility for the attack. In addition, the outlet said several coalition MKs are also having doubts about the situation. According to the report, which did not cite sources or name any of the alleged lawmakers, the MKs are also frustrated at the continuing disarray in government ministries since long before the war, with many key positions not filled due to infighting among officials.

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One unnamed MK told Ynet, “We should have fought harder against the rot. The situation that we have reached is unbelievable. It simply must not be allowed to continue.”

The report cited a recent survey by Nimrod Nir, a political psychologist at the Hebrew University who sampled the opinions of 1,443 Jewish Israelis over several days since the war broke out.

He found that 75 percent hold Netanyahu responsible for the events of October 7. Likewise, over 70% saw Defense Minister Gallant as responsible. Among respondents, 66% felt that Netanyahu should resign when the conflict is over, and just 18% said he could stay. Even in Netanyahu’s own Likud party, over half believe he should go and just 32% felt he can continue to lead, the report said. Public opinion was 64% in favor of calling fresh elections, which would be the sixth round of voting in the past six years as repeated elections failed to produce a stable government.

Joe Biden seems to have found his stride in the wake of the October 7 attacks.

Facing dreadful [polls](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/latest_polls/2024/) back home, and growing whispers in his own party about the wisdom of putting the 80-year-old up for reelection, Biden has suddenly become the right man at the right time.

During his six-hour visit to Israel on Wednesday, Biden spoke forcefully, and often eloquently, about the horrors of the Hamas assault on Israeli towns and kibbutzim; on the painful associations the slaughter raised for Jews around the world; on America’s moral and material support for its grieving ally.

It wasn’t only Biden, the leader of the free world, who showed up for Israel in Tel Aviv. It was also “Uncle Joe,” the folksy and avuncular Irish-American local politician with an ability to connect with seemingly everyone, from world leaders to the common man. He transformed the grave mien of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Issac Herzog into smiles moments after stepping off his plane. He hugged Rachel Edri as she regaled him with her tale of feeding terrorists cookies in her home until they were eliminated by a SWAT team. And he drew on his own pain of losing suddenly his wife and baby daughter in a car crash to offer a heartfelt message of comfort to devastated Israelis.

But throughout Biden’s public statements and meetings, there was an unmistakable refrain of anxiety over the course that the war could take

And Biden has good reason to be apprehensive.The world is watching, he told Netanyahu in front of the cameras. “Israel has a value set like the United States does and other democracies, and they’re looking to see what we’re going to do.”

It’s not that the US is exactly concerned about IDF tactics per se. When US forces have been forced to fight against entrenched enemies in Middle Eastern cities, civilian casualties are inevitably high. US-led coalition and Iraqi forces killed thousands of civilians as they wrested control of west Mosul from ISIS fighters in 2017.

The war crimes accusations from international organizations and the response from the US military were reminiscent of the discourse around Israeli operations against terrorists embedded among civilians.

“With their crude targeting abilities, [US-backed forces’] weapons wreaked havoc in densely populated west Mosul, where large groups of civilians were trapped in homes or makeshift shelters,” [wrote](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/07/at-any-cost-civilian-catastrophe-in-west-mosul-iraq/) Amnesty International. “Even in attacks that seem to have struck their intended military target, the use of unsuitable weapons or failure to take other necessary precautions resulted in needless loss of civilian lives and in some cases constituted disproportionate attacks.”

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An Air Force general [responded](https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/07/12/536870827/amnesty-says-u-s-led-coalition-may-have-committed-war-crimes-in-mosul) to the charges with a defense that could have come from the mouth of an Israeli officer: “We use the most precise and [discriminating] weapons that we can ever use and are available in the world to avoid targeting civilians.”

He stressed that civilian casualties are “going to happen, just based on the nature of the war, but I can tell you that to be effective we’ve got to support the Iraqi security forces and that’s what we’ve done.”

What Biden is actually concerned about is the fact that Israeli operations are given disproportionate scrutiny back at home and around the world, which could badly complicate matters for him.

Biden’s love of and concern for Israel and the Jewish people is genuine and long-standing. But at the same time, he is facing a likely election rematch against the Democrats’ bogeyman, Donald Trump.

He will need every constituency he can get. Most polls show Biden one percentage point ahead of Trump if the general election were held now, with [some](http://chrome-extension/efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/fm.cnbc.com/applications/cnbc.com/resources/editorialfiles/2023/10/18/allamericathistime.pdf) showing Trump leading.

The progressive wing of the Democratic Party has never been an enthusiastic backer of the president. He was the establishment choice in 2020 to keep Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren from capturing the Democratic nomination.

Biden promised explicitly in his campaign platform to reopen the PLO mission in the capital and the US Jerusalem consulate to the Palestinians, to advance policies around a two-state solution, and to oppose settlement expansion.  He has delivered on none of those pledges, and his statements of firm support for Israel, as IDF forces pound the Gaza Strip, are sure to further frustrate progressives, for whom support for the Palestinians is a core priority.

Moreover, with independent far-left professor Cornel West polling around 5 percent, disillusioned progressives have a home for a protest vote, which might be just enough to push Trump over the lineSo he has to keep them on board without exposing himself to attacks from Trump and other Republicans about being unreliable in his backing of Israel, or being complicit in potential IDF military struggles for seeking to limit Israel’s freedom of action.

### Biden’s ambitious Middle East vision

The course the war takes will also the determine the viability of Biden’s vision of a pro-American Middle East bloc.

His administration had been eager to take the next steps in the bipartisan American project of moving out of the Middle East to focus on China, and later Russia. The goal was to put the Iran nuclear issue to rest by striking a new long-term deal, place human rights at the center of relations with Arab allies, and end the 20-year war in Afghanistan.

Though Biden accomplished the last goal, he has learned the lesson that past US presidents have also learned the hard way – America cannot disengage from the Middle East.

As energy prices spiked in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and conflicts in Gaza, Yemen and elsewhere demanded his attention, Biden changed his tune. In July 2022, he flew to Israel and Saudi Arabia to “start a new and more promising chapter of America’s engagement there.”

His administration also began putting its back into multilateral frameworks, like the Negev Forum, the I2U2, and the Aqaba/Sharm el-Sheikh talks. After initially refusing to even say the name, the White House eventually committed to expanding the Abraham Accords.

Then in March, Saudi Arabia and Iran reached a [deal](https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-saudi-arabia-deal-casts-china-in-unfamiliar-but-growing-global-role/) in Beijing. It was a rude awakening for the Americans. If they leave a vacuum in the Middle East, China, Iran and Russia will fill it, they realized.

In September, the US and G20 allies announced an ambitious rail and shipping corridor linking India with the Middle East, Israel and Europe, a counterweight to the Chinese Belt and Road project. Biden said on the trip that it could create “a future of greater peace, greater security and greater prosperity.”

“This can be the beginning of even a greater era of cooperation,” he predicted.

The Biden Administration also leaned heavily into attempts to bring about a Saudi-Israel normalization deal, which would require American defense commitments to Riyadh, keeping the Saudis in America’s embrace for the long term.

Biden’s entire regional vision – which has become an integral part of his strategy against America’s main adversaries, China, Russia, and Iran – now hangs in the balance. The pro-Western Arab countries – with the exception of Qatar – all despise Hamas and have no problem with Israel doing what it wants to the group, but they are more concerned right now with the sentiment of the street. Antisemitism is rampant in these countries, and the Palestinian cause remains dear to the public.

Arab leaders, already criticized domestically for being in bed with the Americans and Zionists, cannot afford to be seen as party to the deaths of thousands of Palestinians as millions more Arabs watch the images on their phones and in their living rooms.

Better to drop out of any emerging multilateral initiatives with Israel, they will reason, than put their own regimes and personal survival on the line.

Meanwhile, Russia and China would be happy to step in if those pro-Western Arab leaderships abandon US projects, and to offer weapons and money with no human rights demands, untainted by support for Israel’s war against Hamas.

### The law of wars

There is an even larger issue at stake in this war: whether liberal democracies can defeat regimes and organizations that reject the values Biden holds dear.

That fight has already been underway since February of last year. Under Biden, the US has [committed](https://www.statista.com/chart/27278/military-aid-to-ukraine-by-country/) more military aid to Ukraine than the rest of the world combined, in an attempt to help the pro-Western government in Kyiv hold off Vladimir Putin’s attempts to force the country back into his orbit.

Now a war rages on another of democracy’s frontiers. To Biden, this is an opportunity to prove that the democratic way is not only more decent and just, but is actually stronger because of the very values it is trying to protect.

“You’re also a democracy,” Biden said in Israel. “Like the United States, you don’t live by the rules of terrorists. You live by the rule of law. When conflicts flare, you live by the law of wars.”

“What sets us apart from the terrorists is we believe in the fundamental dignity of every human life: Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, Jew, Muslim, Christian, everyone. You can’t give up what makes you who you are. If you give that up, then the terrorists win.”

And win Israel must. If this war ends with Hamas still ruling the Gaza Strip, its primary value as an ally to Arab countries – its military reputation – will dissipate. Iran will be encouraged, as will Hezbollah, far more powerful than Hamas, to Israel’s north.

Western allies who are willing to give Israel plenty of slack right now in the hopes that the end goal – the elimination of Hamas – will justify the collateral damage, will be quick to call for an end to hostilities the next time Israel embarks on an operation. If Israel can’t win, they will reason, what justification could there be for civilian deaths?

And, of course, Netanyahu – under whose watch the Jewish people’s worst tragedy since the Holocaust was perpetrated – will see his political life end in ignominy if Israel doesn’t win. Instead of protecting Israel against Iran and forging a historic peace with Saudi Arabia, his legacy will be that of a self-serving leader whose focus on political survival blinded him to the growing threat to the civilians he was elected to protect – and of a wartime leader who botched a war with the world and entire country backing him.

According to retired IDF general Israel Ziv on Channel 12, Biden was telling Netanyahu on Wednesday: We will take care of the aftermath. Washington will help find a new arrangement to administer the Gaza Strip, and will make sure the Saudi deal is back on track. But you had better win.

The stakes couldn’t be higher on the Israeli side, but Biden has an immense amount riding on the outcome – and on the manner in which Israel achieves it.

“It’s a temporary measure, which should be for the short term,” said the source, who refused to be quoted by name.

The National Security Council late on Tuesday called on all Israelis in Turkey to leave “as soon as possible.”

On Wednesday, its consulate in Istanbul said it was for their own safety given the growing terrorist threats against Israelis abroad.

Israel arranged evacuation flights to repatriate citizens from Turkey, while issuing a travel warning of the highest threat level to the country.

The spike in security threats in Turkey came after a deadly explosion at a Gaza hospital parking lot on Tuesday, which has been blamed by Hamas and the Arab and Muslim world on Israel.

[Jerusalem](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-presents-evidence-misfired-gazan-rocket-caused-hospital-blast-slams-hamas-lies/) has produced evidence to refute the claim and show that the blast, which killed scores of people, was caused by a misfired rocket launched by a Palestinian terror group toward Israeli cities. The [US](https://www.timesofisrael.com/intel-shows-israel-not-responsible-for-gaza-hospital-blast-white-house-says/), other Western countries and many analysts have confirmed or endorsed the Israeli account.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has joined many Arab countries in blaming Israel, straining diplomatic relations. Turkey’s foreign ministry also condemned “these barbaric attacks in the strongest terms,” in a statement issued shortly after the explosion.

Turkey maintains ties with Hamas, the terror group that slaughtered some 1,400 Israelis in an unprecedented assault from Gaza on October 7, plunging the region into war.

On Tuesday night, shortly after the hospital blast, protesters demonstrated outside the Istanbul consulate and the embassy in Ankara, shouting pro-Palestinian chants. Dozens were hurt in clashes between police and protesters outside the consulate when several demonstrators tried to overcome security barricades in order to enter the consulate building. Police detained five people.

Ankara was previously involved in trying to mediate a deescalation of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

Turkey’s top diplomat Hakan Fidan said Tuesday that following requests from several governments, his country had been in touch with the Hamas terror group over some 200 Israeli and foreign hostages the terror group is holding in Gaza in the aftermath of its murderous onslaught on October 7, in which thousands of terrorists invaded Israel and massacred some 1,400 people, most of them civilians murdered in their homes or at an outdoor music festival.

On Monday, Fidan spoke with Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh on the phone about the possibility of the release of hostages.

“Our efforts continue, especially for the release of foreigners, civilians and children. We will continue our efforts to ensure lasting peace,” Fidan said on Tuesday.

The vast majority of the captives are civilians.

Convening to approve a series of emergency wartime measures, the Knesset on Wednesday passed a law enabling National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir to worsen the conditions of security prisoners.

According to the new law, which passed 16-1, the national security minister would be able to declare a “prison emergency,” upon the recommendation of the Israel Prison Service commissioner and with the consent of the prime minister and the defense minister.

The emergency law is valid for three months.

on September 10, 2023. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

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The emergency law is valid for three months. In particular, Ben Gvir has said that he wants to house Palestinian detainees and prisoners on mattresses, rather than in beds, in order to accommodate a potential influx of terror-related inmates, in the wake of Hamas’s October 7 onslaught that killed some 1,400 Israelis, and Israel’s ensuing war with the terror organization.

Any order issued by the national security minister under this emergency measure would be valid for five days, and extendable for up to 30 days. The Knesset’s National Security Committee can give its consent for further extensions.

Notes accompanying the new law say it is intended to reduce pressure on the prison service, in light of the ongoing war.“The assessment of security officials is that many more detainees are expected to be absorbed in the near future in view of the state of war, taking into account that the fighting is still ongoing,” they read.

Last week, Ben Gvir said that he had consulted Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara on the emergency move, and that she gave her approval

Ben Gvir, who leads the far-right Otzma Yehudit party, has made headlines in the past for ordering the prison service to reduce terror inmates’ shower times and end the practice of baking fresh pita in prison kitchens, as well as reducing prisoner visits. Critics ridiculed some of the measures as spiteful and unhelpful to Israel’s battle against terror.

The Knesset advanced two further wartime measures on Wednesday: a bill to delay certain payments owed by people serving in the war, abducted by Hamas or missing as a result of its terror attack, or living in an evacuated community near the Gaza or Lebanon border, and a bill to hold initial courtroom hearings through video conference.

Both cleared their first reading on Wednesday and were sent to committee for a rapid recall to the plenum, where they are expected to be quickly finalized.

According to the payments bill, creditors and courts must grant a 30-day grace period before requiring payment. The bill grants a similar 30-day postponement for “the execution of actions stipulated in a contract or judgment.”

For the purposes of defining wartime service, the bill extends protection to police officers, firefighters, and prison guards, alongside soldiers.

The defense minister, with approval of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, can extent the period of this temporary order up to December 31, 2023, or longer with committee approvalon September 10, 2023. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

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Illustrative: View of the Gilboa Prison, near the Jordan Valley, December 5, 2022. (Avshalom Sassoni/Flash90)

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Israeli soldiers patrol along a road near the border between Israel and Lebanon, in Israel, Oct. 16, 2023. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)

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Notes accompanying the bill explain that it is geared toward taking pressure off of Israelis most affected by wartime circumstances.

Prisoners would have their right to an in-person hearing curtailed by proposed temporary measures to hold pretrial hearings by video conference, and in exceptional circumstances, telephone calls.

Backers of the bill write that “there is significant difficulty in transporting prisoners and detainees throughout the country, in a way that will not endanger them and those transporting and accompanying them.”

The also cite manpower shortages in the prison service, and say transporting prisoners for hearings would be logistically challenging.

Only wartime and emergency legislation is expected to be advanced until the end of hostilities, barring legislation pushed by consensus between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister Benny Gantz, in line with the terms of their emergency government.

Israel acknowledged Monday that one of its ministries drafted a wartime proposal to transfer the Gaza Strip’s 2.3 million people to Egypt’s Sinai peninsula, drawing condemnation from the Palestinians and worsening tensions with Cairo.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office played down the report compiled by the Intelligence Ministry as a hypothetical exercise — a “concept paper.” But its conclusions deepened long-standing Egyptian fears that Israel wants to make Gaza into Egypt’s problem, and revived for Palestinians memories of their greatest trauma — the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of people who fled or were forced from their homes during the fighting surrounding Israel’s creation in 1948.

“We are against transfer to any place, in any form, and we consider it a red line that we will not allow to be crossed,” Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, said of the report. “What happened in 1948 will not be allowed to happen again.”

A mass displacement, Rudeineh said, would be “tantamount to declaring a new war.”

### Aimed at preserving security for Israel

The document is dated October 13, six days after the Hamas attack. It was first published by Sicha Mekomit, a local news site.

In its report, the Intelligence Ministry — a junior ministry that conducts research but does not set policy — offered three alternatives “to effect a significant change in the civilian reality in the Gaza Strip in light of the Hamas crimes that led to the Sword of Iron war” — using the IDF label given to the war.

The document proposes moving Gaza’s civilian population to tent cities in northern Sinai, then building permanent cities and an undefined humanitarian corridor. A security zone would be established inside Israel to block the displaced Palestinians from entering. The report did not say what would become of Gaza once its population is cleared out but its authors deem this alternative to be the most desirable for Israel’s security.

Egypt’s Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the report. But Egypt has made clear throughout this latest war that it does not want to take in a wave of Palestinian refugees.

Egypt has long feared that Israel wants to force a permanent expulsion of Palestinians into its territory, as happened during the war surrounding Israel’s independence. Egypt ruled Gaza between 1948 and 1967, when Israel captured the territory, along with the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The vast majority of Gaza’s population are the descendants of Palestinian refugees uprooted from what is now Israel.

Egypt’s president, Abdel Fattah El-Sissi, has said a mass influx of refugees from Gaza would eliminate the Palestinian nationalist cause. It would also risk bringing militants into Sinai, where they might launch attacks on Israel, he said. That would endanger the countries’ 1979 peace treaty. He proposed that Israel instead house Palestinians in its Negev Desert, which neighbors the Gaza Strip until it ends its military operations.

Yoel Guzansky, a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said the paper threatened to damage relations with a key partner.

“This is a grave mistake. It might cause a strategic rift between Israel and Egypt,” said Guzansky, who said he has consulted for the ministry in the past. “I see it either as ignorance or someone who wants to negatively affect Israel-Egypt relations, which are very important at this stage.”

Egypt is a valuable partner that cooperates behind the scenes with Israel, he said. If it is seen as overtly assisting an Israeli plan like this, especially involving the Palestinians, it could be “devastating to its stability.”

### Questions of legitimacy – and other possible destinations

Egypt would not necessarily be the Palestinian refugees’ last stop. The document speaks about Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates supporting the plan either financially, or by taking in uprooted residents of Gaza as refugees and in the long term as citizens. Canada’s “lenient” immigration practices also make it a potential resettlement target, the document adds.

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At first glance, this proposal “is liable to be complicated in terms of international legitimacy,” the document acknowledges. “In our assessment, fighting after the population is evacuated would lead to fewer civilian casualties compared to what could be expected if the population were to remain.”

An Israeli official familiar with the document said it isn’t binding and that there was no substantive discussion of it with security officials. Netanyahu’s office called it a “concept paper, the likes of which are prepared at all levels of the government and its security agencies.”

“The issue of the ‘day after’ has not been discussed in any official forum in Israel, which is focused at this time on destroying the governing and military capabilities of Hamas,” the prime minister’s office said.

The document dismisses the two other options: reinstating the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority as the sovereign in Gaza or supporting a local regime. Among other reasons, it rejects them as unable to deter attacks on Israel.

The reinstatement of the Palestinian Authority, which was ejected from Gaza after a weeklong 2007 war with Hamas, which won power, would be “an unprecedented victory of the Palestinian national movement, a victory that will claim the lives of thousands of Israeli civilians and soldiers, and does not safeguard Israel’s security,” the document says.

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh has [said in a newspaper interview](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pas-premier-says-ramallah-wont-take-over-gaza-without-plan-that-includes-west-bank/) that the PA would only agree to take over Gaza as part of a broader peace initiative to create a Palestinian state.

### Lobbying Egypt to take in refugees

Despite the downplaying of the paper by Netanyahu’s office, the Financial Times [reported](https://www.ft.com/content/75971d8b-e2fd-4275-8747-0bd443673483) Monday that the premier has sought to convince European leaders to pressure Egypt into accepting refugees.

Officials from the Czech Republic and Austria relayed the idea during a meeting of European leaders last week but officials from France, Germany and the UK quickly rejected the proposal as unrealistic, given Egypt’s public opposition to taking in refugees.

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Israel has refused to publicly promise that refugees will be allowed back into Gaza if they leave, hardening Cairo’s stance against the idea, an Arab diplomat told The Times of Israel last week.

Gaza’s Hamas-run health ministry has said that more than 8,300 people have been killed in the war, many of them children. The figures issued by the terror group cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include its own members killed in Gaza and Israel, as well as the victims of what Israel says are hundreds of errant Palestinian rockets aimed at Israel that have landed inside the Strip since the war began.

The current war erupted on October 7 after some 2,500 Hamas and other terrorists stormed across the Gaza frontier in a multi-pronged attack and killed over 1,400 people, most of them civilians slaughtered in their homes and at an outdoor music festival.

The terrorists also abducted over 230 people to Gaza. The captives, also mainly civilians, include women, the elderly and children, some still in diapers.

Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas and remove it from power. The IDF has carried out intensive strikes on Gaza and troops have entered the Palestinian enclave ahead of an expected major ground operation. Israel says it is striving to minimize civilian casualties and has instructed Palestinians in the northern Gaza Strip to evacuate and head south. According to the IDF, some 700,000 people of the estimated 1.1 million population of northern Gaza have evacuated south.

Terror groups led by Hamas have continued to barrage southern and central Israel with rocket fire, causing further deaths and injuries. There has also been sporadic rocket fire in the north from the Lebanese Hezbollah terror group and its allies. Over 200,000 people in Israel have been displaced from their homes.

International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan said Sunday his institution was conducting “active investigations” into the October 7 Hamas massacres, as well as the situation in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Visiting the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, Khan also warned that preventing access to humanitarian aid could constitute a war crime and urged Israel to allow more trucks into the enclave.

Khan said his office had “active investigations” ongoing into “any crimes committed on the territory of Palestine and any crimes committed, whether it’s by Israel and Palestine or whether it’s acts committed on the territory of Palestine or from Palestine into Israel.”

“This includes current events in Gaza and also current events in the West Bank,” Khan said, adding that he was “very concerned also by the spike of the number of reported incidents of attack by settlers against Palestinian civilians” in the West Bank.

He indicated the investigation was a continuation of the ICC’s existing probe focusing on the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict, Israeli settlement policy and the Israeli response to protests at the Gaza border that was launched by Khan’s predecessor Fatou Bensouda and approved in 2021.

Israel, which isn’t a member of the court and hasn’t ratified its Rome Statute, has refused to cooperate with the ICC.

The court’s jurisdiction only covers the West Bank and Gaza, but Khan indicated it could also cover actions by Gazans on October 7, when some 2,500 Palestinian terrorists broke into southern Israel, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and kidnapping over 230.

We are independently looking at the situation in Palestine, we’re looking at the events in Israel and the allegations that Palestinian nationals have also committed crimes, we need cooperation and assistance,” he said.

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He noted that hostage-taking was a breach of the Geneva Conventions.

“I call for the immediate release of all hostages taken from Israel and for their safe return to their families,” Khan said.

Speaking to reporters in Cairo later, the British lawyer said he wanted “to underline clearly to Israel that there must be discernible efforts without further delay to make sure civilians” in the Hamas-run Palestinian territory “receive basic food, medicines.”

“Impeding relief supplies as provided by the Geneva conventions may constitute a crime within the court jurisdiction,” Khan said. “I saw trucks full of goods full of humanitarian assistance stuck where nobody needs them, stuck in Egypt, stuck at Rafah.”

“These supplies must get to the civilians of Gaza without delay,” he added.

An Israeli military official said Sunday that “hundreds of tons” of humanitarian supplies have been provided so far to Gaza through a joint mechanism managed together with the US, Egypt and the UN.

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The aid goes through Israel into Egypt via the Nitzana border crossing between the two countries south of Gaza where it undergoes a security check. It is then taken through the Rafah crossing on the Egypt-Gaza border and transferred to UN agencies for distribution.

“We are trying to act in accordance with the international laws of war in order to minimize any harm to civilians, but war has consequences,” said IDF Col. Elad Goren, who heads the civilian department of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories. “But Hamas started a war against the State of Israel, and its [the Hamas] government harms and exploits those who are trying not to take part in terrorism.”

He added that the amount of humanitarian aid that will be transferred to the territory will “increase dramatically” in the coming weeks

Khan also warned Israel about sticking to the laws of conflict as it carries out airstrikes and a ground offensive aimed at eliminating Hamas, the Strip’s de facto rulers.

“Israel has clear obligations in relation to its war with Hamas, not just moral obligations but legal obligations,” he said.

“These principles equally apply to Hamas in relation to firing indiscriminate rockets into Israel.”

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza says more than 8,000 people have been killed since October 7, mainly civilians and half of them children. The figures cannot be verified, and are thought to include fighters as well as those killed by rockets misfired by terror groups in the Strip. Israel says it does not target civilians and has sought to limit civilian casualties, including by urging those in northern Gaza, where the main fighting is taking place, to move south.

The ICC prosecutor evoked the Holocaust and World War II in explaining the reason for his mission to the region, saying the ICC will work professionally to “separate allegation from fact,” and examine all relevant evidence.

“This is a moment of objectivity, a moment of quiet reflection and it needs to be a moment in which the international community and the international architecture built on the rubble of World War II, the terrible gas chambers and the Holocaust, the razing of cities throughout Europe, [which] was meant to create institutions that would ensure never again would we see abominations where people could be targeted for their race, religion, culture, where they come from or what passport they hold,” said Khan.

“Those promises need to be fulfilled.”

Senior Israeli officials talked up the prospect of an imminent large-scale ground campaign in the Gaza Strip to root out the Hamas terror group Thursday, making a series of visits to Israel Defense Forces soldiers stationed near the territory and predicting that the fighting will be “difficult, long and intense,” but ultimately victorious.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told troops near Gaza that the order to enter the Hamas-run Palestinian enclave would come “soon.”

“You now see Gaza from afar, soon you will see it from the inside,” Gallant told troops of the Givati Brigade. “The order will come.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also paid a visit to the frontlines, rallying a group of Golani soldiers near the Gaza border and telling them Israel was on its way to a major victory.

“We are going to win with all our might,” Netanyahu told the group of soldiers. “All of Israel is behind you, and we are going to heavily strike our enemies so that we can achieve victory.

The head of the IDF Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman, said the expected ground offensive would be “long and intense.”

“This war was forced on us, with a cruel enemy that harmed us greatly. But we stopped them… we are striking them heavily,” Finkelman told troops near the Gaza border

“Now, the maneuver is going to move the fighting to their territory. We are going to beat them in their territory,” he said. “It’s going to be difficult, long and intense.”Israel has for the past week urged all residents of northern Gaza, some one million people, to evacuate to the center and south of the Strip as it prepares to intensify operations in the enclave’s north. Hundreds of thousands have done so, according to the military, despite Hamas urging them not to leave their homes and in some cases putting up roadblocks.

In a further sign the start of the ground offensive may be looming, Netanyahu’s security cabinet, the body which must approve a ground incursion, met Thursday evening. The forum has convened many times throughout the war already.

War erupted after some 2,500 Hamas-led terrorists blasted through the Israeli border fence on October 7, streamed into Israel via land, sea and air under a barrage of thousands of rockets, and killed some 1,400 people, the vast majority of them civilians.

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Terrorists also took at least 203 hostages of all ages into Gaza and are holding them captive.

Israel called up 360,000 reservists in the wake of the massacre and has vowed to eliminate Hamas, which has been the de facto ruler in the Strip since 2006.

With tanks and weapons mustering near the Gaza border, reports have indicated that the military is awaiting a green light from the political leadership.

Recent days have seen growing pressure on the government to devise a clear strategy for how it plans to avoid getting bogged down in a lengthy reoccupation of the Strip, while ensuring the Palestinian enclave is no longer managed by the terror group and no longer poses a threat

Gallant also took responsibility for the failure to prevent Hamas’s onslaught on southern Israel, speaking at a military assembly ground near the Gaza border.

“I am responsible for the defense establishment. I was responsible for it in the last two weeks, even in the difficult incidents, and I am responsible for bringing it to victory in the battle,” Gallant said.

“We will be precise and deadly and we will continue until we complete the mission,”

National Unity party chair Benny Gantz and fellow party member Gadi Eisenkot, who entered the coalition last week to form an emergency wartime cabinet, have demanded the creation of a Gaza exit strategy and have tasked a committee with drawing one up, an Israeli official told The Times of Israel earlier this week.

US President Joe Biden’s administration has also been privately pressing Israel to flesh out its exit strategy, the Israeli official and a US official said at the time. Netanyahu and his inner circle indicated to their American counterparts that Israel had not yet come up with such a strategy and is more focused on the immediate goal of removing Hamas from power in Gaza, the US official said.

On Wednesday, Biden cautioned Israel against getting bogged down in Gaza indefinitely, drawing on the US’s experiences in Afghanistan following its 2001 invasion to topple the Taliban in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

“Justice must be done,” Biden said in Tel Aviv. “But I caution this: While you feel that rage, don’t be consumed by it… After 9/11, we were enraged in the United States. While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes.”

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Betraying an unease with the possibility that Israel’s campaign against Hamas could get derailed by civilian losses, Biden warned that wartime leadership “requires clarity about the objectives and an honest assessment about whether the path you’re on will achieve those objectives.”

According to the Kan public broadcaster, the political leadership reportedly ordered the military to slow or halt activity in Gaza during Biden’s trip, and Jerusalem was thought to prefer to wait until after Biden’s visit to put boots on the ground in Gaza.

The fighting, which indeed appeared to abate during Biden’s visit to Israel on Wednesday, resumed in full force on Wednesday night and Thursday, with extensive Israeli airstrikes on Hamas targets in the Strip, and Palestinian terror groups firing frequent barrages of rockets toward central and southern Israel.

There were also [growing exchanges of fire and rocket attacks on the Lebanon border](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-shells-southern-lebanon-after-missiles-fired-at-border-community/), compounding fears that the powerful Iran-backed Hezbollah terror group could open a new war front, which it and Tehran have threatened will happen if Israel enters Gaza.

In Kiryat Shmona, three people were injured by a rocket strike on a home, in what appeared to be the most serious attack on the city since 2006.

In a briefing last week, a military official indicated that conditions on the northern border could affect the IDF’s decision-making on when to launch an incursion

The prospect of a ground invasion has brought with it concerns that the Strip’s dire humanitarian situation could worsen. Aid is expected to start being delivered to Gazan civilians on Friday, when the Rafah crossing with Egypt was set to open.

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After prodding by Washington, Israel said it would allow water, medicine and food to reach southern Gaza from Egypt, angering some family members of Israelis being held captive in Gaza, who had demanded concessions for their loved ones in exchange for any such move.

Israeli airstrikes on Gaza continued on Thursday, alongside intense rocket fire by terrorists toward Israeli cities and towns, including the Tel Aviv area.

Rockets were fired in the late afternoon and evening toward cities including Holon, Rishon Lezion, Beersheba, Sderot, Ashdod and Ashkelon, as well as Gaza border communities.

Two rockets landed in Sderot, causing damage but no injuries. The vast majority of residents of the Gaza border city have left since the October 7 massacre.

Three senior officials in Gazan terror groups were [reported killed early Thursday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-senior-terror-officials-reported-killed-in-gaza-number-of-israeli-hostages-at-203/). The IDF said an airstrike in the southern Gaza city of Rafah had killed Rafat Abu Hilal, the head of the military wing of Gaza’s Popular Resistance Committees terror group, the third-largest terror faction in the Strip after Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Hamas-affiliated media in Gaza reported that Jamila al-Shanti, the widow of Hamas co-founder Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, was also killed in an Israeli strike.

And Palestinian media outlets reported that the head of the Palestinian National Security Forces in the Gaza Strip was killed in an Israeli airstrike.

The Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza says at least 3,785 people have been killed since Israel began its airstrikes.

Some 1,524 children and 1,000 women are among those killed in the relentless Israeli airstrikes, the ministry said, claiming that another 12,493 people had been injured.

Israel and other international bodies have cast doubt on Hamas’s claims about the toll of those killed and wounded in Gaza. Jerusalem has said some 1,500 terrorists were killed in Israeli territory after the mass infiltration on October 7

The goal of Hamas’s October 7 massacres in southern Israel was to “change the entire equation,” bring permanent war to Israel’s borders and renew attention to the Palestinian cause, a senior member of the terror group’s politburo in Qatar said.

“What could change the equation was a great act, and without a doubt, it was known that the reaction to this great act would be big,” Khalil al-Hayya told The New York Times [in an interview](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/08/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-gaza-war.html) published Wednesday. “We had to tell people that the Palestinian cause would not die.”

On the morning of Saturday, October 7, some 3,000 Hamas terrorists stormed through the border fence into Israel, killing 1,400 people, most of them civilians, and taking at least 240 hostages.

Many of the victims were families murdered in their homes, and 260 people were mowed down at an outdoor music festival.

The onslaught was the deadliest attack in the country’s history, and in response, Israel vowed to eliminate Hamas from Gaza, where the group has ruled since 2007. An offensive has been launched from the air, ground and sea, with over 11,000 targets struck since the start of the war.

“We succeeded in putting the Palestinian issue back on the table, and now no one in the region is experiencing calm,” Al-Hayya said, confirming that he considered the attacks a success.

While world leaders have been pushing for Israel to agree to a ceasefire in its war against the Gaza terror group, Al-Hayya and other Hamas members dismissed the idea that they want to govern Gaza and restore a sense of calm, instead expressing support for endless conflict.

“I hope that the state of war with Israel will become permanent on all the borders, and that the Arab world will stand with us,” Hamas media consultant Taher El-Nounou told The Times.

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“Hamas’s goal is not to run Gaza and to bring it water and electricity and such,” al-Hayya added. “Hamas, the Qassam [Brigades, its armed wing] and the resistance woke the world up from its deep sleep and showed that this issue must remain on the table.”

According to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry, more than 10,000 people inside the coastal enclave have been killed since October 7. However, this number cannot be independently verified and is believed to include members of the terror organization as well as civilians killed by misfired rockets that fell within the Strip.

While international bodies including the United Nations and the World Health Organization have warned that Gaza is facing a humanitarian catastrophe as a result of heavy bombardment and its blockaded borders with Israel and Egypt, Hamas has continued to laud October 7 as a success and has dismissed the high civilian death toll as the price for victory.

On October 24, senior Hamas member [Ghazi Hamad](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/) told Lebanese TV channel LBC that the October 7 massacre was just the first of many, and that “there will be a second, a third, and a fourth” attack if the group is given the chance.

“Will we have to pay a price? Yes, and we are ready to pay it,” he said at the time. “We are called a nation of martyrs, and we are proud to sacrifice martyrs.”

Israel has faced increased calls to allow fuel to enter the Gaza Strip in recent days as hospitals warn that they will soon run out. However, even as the country grants access to other humanitarian aid it continues to refrain from allowing fuel to enter, due to the concern that Hamas will hijack the fuel, using it instead to continue to attack Israel.

For its part, Hamas is believed to be stockpiling about half a million liters of fuel, even as hospitals run low, evidence of which has been corroborated by Western and Arab officials.

“This battle was not because we wanted fuel or laborers,” Al-Hayya told The Times of the consequences faced by Gaza’s civilians after the October 7 attack. “It did not seek to improve the situation in Gaza. This battle is to completely overthrow the situation.”

As Israel marked two weeks since Hamas launched its devastating onslaught on southern Israel, the first 20 trucks carrying aid entered Gaza on Saturday through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt.

The aid moved into the Strip amid continued rocket fire toward southern and central Israel, and as the number of confirmed hostages abducted from Israel and held in Gaza rose to 210.

The Rafah border crossing was closed again after the passage of the trucks from the Egyptian Red Crescent, which is responsible for delivering aid from various UN agencies

Rafah, Egypt, October 21, 2023. (Mohammed Asad/AP)

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It was unclear if any foreign nationals had left Gaza. Ahead of the opening of the border, the US Embassy in Jerusalem had warned of “potentially chaotic and disorderly environment on both sides of the crossing.”

As the trucks went through, an Israeli security official told reporters on Saturday: “As of now, I can tell you that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza. There are hardships in moving people within days to the south of the Gaza Strip, but the population is getting along

“There is no shortage of water in Gaza, there is enough food for the coming weeks, this is in addition to the supply of medicines which, as far as we know, there is no shortage in the hospitals,”Meanwhile, IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari emphasized that “fuel will not enter Gaza.” Israel is concerned that the fuel can be used by terror groups to manufacture weapons.

Cargo planes and trucks have been bringing humanitarian aid to the Egyptian side of Rafah for days, but until Saturday none had been delivered to Gaza

US President Joe Biden had pushed for the trucks to be allowed to pass into Gaza during a solidarity visit to Israel on Wednesday.

Biden had said the first 20 trucks would be a test of a system for distributing aid without allowing Hamas to benefit, with UN agencies set to distribute it on the Gaza side of the border, but warned that if Hamas “doesn’t let it get through or just confiscates it, then it’s going to end.”

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Saturday [welcomed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/blinken-welcomes-start-of-aid-to-gaza-still-working-to-get-foreign-citizens-out/) the delivery of the aid and thanked Egypt, Israel and the United Nations for securing the assistance, which he said will help begin addressing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Blinken said the reopening of Rafah followed days of “exhaustive” diplomatic engagements by the US with Israel and Egypt and called on the sides to do their part to keep Rafah open so that more aid can get into Gaza.

“Hamas must not interfere with the provision of this life-saving assistance,” Blinken said. “Palestinian civilians are not responsible for Hamas’s horrific terrorism, and they should not be made to suffer for its depraved acts.”

The aid was the first such delivery since war erupted after Hamas’s October 7 massacre, which saw some 2,500 terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing hostages of all ages under the cover of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

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The vast majority of those killed as gunmen seized border communities were civilians — men, women, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists, in what Biden has highlighted as “the worst massacre of the Jewish people since the Holocaust.”

Israel says its offensive against Hamas is aimed at destroying the terror group’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire organization, which rules the Strip. Israel says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

Blinken said that the US will continue working to establish safe zones in Gaza where civilians can go to stay out of harm’s way, to allow US citizens looking to leave the Strip to be able to do so, and to secure the release of the hostages taken by terrorists.

Two American-Israeli hostages — mother and daughter Judith and Natalie Raanan — were released on Friday evening.

On Saturday, the Israel Defense Forces said the families of 210 hostages have been notified that their loved ones are being held in the Gaza Strip, but that the number was not final as the military is investigating new information on those still missing.

Also on Saturday, Gaza terrorists fired a number of rocket barrages toward central and southern Israel, with a home hit in the largely evacuated southern city of Sderot.

The Magen David Adom ambulance service said there were no reports of injuries.

Hagari said that over the past 24 hours, a fifth of the projectiles fired by terrorists in Gaza have fallen short in the Strip.

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“More than 550 rockets launched by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad have failed [since the war started], killing innocent civilians in Gaza. They are killing their own civilians,” Hagari said.

Hagari said that the IDF “will continue strikes on Hamas strongholds in northern Gaza,” as the military continued to hit terror targets in the Strip.

The targets included command centers and various other infrastructure belonging to the terror group, as well as a number of anti-tank missile launch sites and sniper positions in high-rise buildings, the military said.

Ahead of the looming ground invasion, the Israeli military has told civilians living in north Gaza to move to the southern part of the enclave.

However, the anonymous security official said Saturday that Hamas is still trying to prevent people from moving south, and several hospitals in the northern part of the Strip have not yet been evacuated.

“In the north of the Gaza Strip there are 20 hospitals. As of now six have already been vacated, 10 have not yet, and four are refusing,” the official said.

The official said it is hard for some of the hospitals to move seriously wounded and ill patients, but that the military has “a direct relationship with almost all hospital managers and we encourage them to evacuate.”

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The official also accused Hamas of using some hospitals as shelters, “because it knows this is a sensitive site we will avoid attacking.”

Rafah, Egypt, October 21, 2023. (Mohammed Asad/AP)

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“There is no shortage of water in Gaza, there is enough food for the coming weeks, this is in addition to the supply of medicines which, as far as we know, there is no shortage in the hospitals,” he said.



Trucks with humanitarian aid for the Gaza Strip enter from Egypt in Rafah on Oct. 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Fatima Shbair)

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Natalie Raanan, 3rd left, Judith Raanan, right, are seen upon arrival in Israel after being released from Hamas captivity as government hostage envoy Gal Hirsch, center, holds their hands, October 20, 2023 (Courtesy)

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A house in Sderot is hit by rocket fire from the Gaza Strip on October 21, 2023 (Sderot Municipality)

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“More than 550 rockets launched by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad have failed [since the war started], killing innocent civilians in Gaza. They are killing their own civilians,” Hagari said.

Hagari said that the IDF “will continue strikes on Hamas strongholds in northern Gaza,” as the military continued to hit terror targets in the Strip.

The targets included command centers and various other infrastructure belonging to the terror group, as well as a number of anti-tank missile launch sites and sniper positions in high-rise buildings, the military said.

Ahead of the looming ground invasion, the Israeli military has told civilians living in north Gaza to move to the southern part of the enclave.

However, the anonymous security official said Saturday that Hamas is still trying to prevent people from moving south, and several hospitals in the northern part of the Strip have not yet been evacuated.

“In the north of the Gaza Strip there are 20 hospitals. As of now six have already been vacated, 10 have not yet, and four are refusing,” the official said.

The official said it is hard for some of the hospitals to move seriously wounded and ill patients, but that the military has “a direct relationship with almost all hospital managers and we encourage them to evacuate.”

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The official also accused Hamas of using some hospitals as shelters, “because it knows this is a sensitive site we will avoid attacking.”



Smoke rises following Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City, Oct. 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Abed Khaled)

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza has claimed that more than 4,100 Palestinians, mainly civilians, have been killed in Israeli bombardments since the October 7 massacres in Israel. The figures issued by the terror group cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include its own terrorists and gunmen, and the victims of a blast at a Gaza City hospital on October 17. Hamas blamed the blast on Israel, which has produced evidence showing it was caused by an Islamic Jihad rocket misfire. The United States, also citing its own data, has endorsed the Israeli account

The Swiss judiciary is investigating possible financing of Hamas from Switzerland despite the country not classifying the group as a terrorist organization, its attorney general says.

The investigation was opened “several weeks” before the October 7 attacks by Hamas on Israel, Stefan Blaettler says, on Swiss public radio station SRF, without revealing further details.

The Attorney General’s office later tells AFP that the investigation was launched “on suspicion of financing Hamas from Switzerland”

Qassam Brigades, in Gaza City, on June 14, 2021. (Mahmud Hams/AFP)

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The investigation is expected to be laborious because, unlike the European Union and the United States, Switzerland has not placed bans on Hamas.

But since the attack, mounting calls for the Swiss government to take action has prompted it to respond.

Four days after the attack, the government said it was “of the opinion that Hamas must be classified a terrorist organization

Senior cabinet ministers, as well as members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party, called at a Monday event for the reestablishment of Jewish settlements in Gaza, while others urged the encouragement of Palestinian emigration from the war-ravaged territory.

Speaking at the large ultranationalist conference on the Gaza border, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir said that “encouraging emigration” of Palestinian residents of the territory was the best and “most ethical” solution to the conflict.

Likud members made similar comments, with Social Equality and Advancement of the Status of Women Minister May Golan declaring at the conference that “taking territory” from Arabs is what “hurts them most,” and that settlements in Gaza would bolster Israel’s security

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who also attended the conference, endorsed the idea of rebuilding settlements in Gaza, stating on his way to the event that the Strip was “part of the Land of Israel” and that “without settlements, there is no security.”

Numerous other government ministers and coalition MKs attended the event, including Negev and Galilee Minister Yitzhak Wasserlauf of Ben Gvir’s ultranationalist Otzma Yehudit party, along with Likud MKs Avichay Buaron, Tali Gotliv and Ariel Kallner.

Earlier, veteran settler leader Daniella Weiss, whose settlement movement organized the conference, declared that Gazans had “lost their right” to live in the territory in the wake of the October 7 massacre and would not remain thereA group of several dozen anti-government protesters, including residents of Gaza border communities, demonstrated outside the designated area for the conference, and decried the staging of the event in the area when hostages, including residents of the area, were still being held hostage by Hamas.

Police prevented the protesters from entering the conference area itself.

**The event, dubbed the “Preparing to Settle Gaza” conference, was organized by the Nachala organization, which has for years promoted the establishment of settlements in the West Bank and is now advocating similar policies for Gaza.**

**The conference sported the characteristic vim and ardor of the settler community, with musicians such as Aharon Razel providing the soundtrack to some zestful dancing in between political speeches.**

**The event was attended overwhelmingly by members of the religious-Zionist community, many of whom came from West Bank settlements for the day. Some set up sukkahs, the temporary huts built for the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, on Sunday night and slept at the site ahead of the conference.**

**Workshops were put on by settler activists associated with Nachala to provide instructions on how to build new settlements from scratch, as Nachala has done on several occasions, most notably establishing the illegal outpost of Evyatar in the northern West Bank, which was recently legalized by the government.**

**Along with Nachala, the ultranationalist Religious Zionism and Otzma Yehudit parties also participated in organizing the conference, while the Likud party sent a delegation of some 10 MKs to attend the event.**

**It was the second such conference to be held this year, after a similar event staged by Nachala in Jerusalem in January led to international condemnation.**

“If we want to, we can renew settlement in Gaza,” Ben Gvir said in a brief but central speech from the podium at the conference, held opposite the Netzarim Corridor, which dissects central Gaza.

“We can [also] do something else — encourage emigration. The truth is, this is the most ethical and the most correct solution,” he added, while adding that this should not be done “by force” and that Gazans should be told Israel is “giving them the option” of going to other countries.

“The Land of Israel is ours,” he declared.

Writing on X on his way to the conference, Smotrich said that territory relinquished by Israel in the past had turned into “Iranian forward terror bases,” and endangered the country.

“Today’s conference is part of a public process of advocacy and meant to harness [the public], and is intended to promote a practical process of pioneering, Zionist settlement,” he wrote.

He noted, however, that the national debate on rebuilding settlements in Gaza was relevant “for the day after the war,” which would be decided “in the normal democratic ways.”

Earlier in the day, Nachala leader Weiss went even further, essentially calling for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza by proclaiming that the Palestinian population had “lost their right” to live there.

“Wars bring about the terrible issue of refugees. October 7 changed history, as a result of the brutal massacre Gazan Arabs lost their right to be here; they will not stay here, they will go to different countries, we will convince the world,” declared Weiss, a veteran campaigner for the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

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“We came here to settle the entire Gaza Strip, from north to south, not just part of it,” she added in reference to the purpose of the conference itself.

Weiss said that Nachala had set up six “settlement groups” comprising a total of 700 families “who are ready right now” to establish new settlements in Gaza, should the opportunity arise.

In a rambling speech assailing the media, progressives and other perceived opponents of the political right, Likud minister Golan declared that “taking territory from them is what hurts them most,” and insisted that “settlements in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] brought security” to Israel.

Speaking after her, hardline Likud MK Kallner declared that “settlements are total victory,” adding, “What they see as *Dar Islam* [the House of Islam] will become *Dar Yahud* [the House of Jews],” and insisting like Golan that settlements would improve security.

The theme of settlements providing Israel with greater security was widely voiced at the conference, and repeated by Haim Waltzer, a current resident of the recently legalized West Bank outpost of Evyatar and former resident of the Gush Katif settlements in Gaza, which were evacuated in 2005 under the Gaza Disengagement plan.

“Settling the land is my life’s mission. The real reason is that God commanded us [to settle the land] when he gave us the land 3,000 years ago as is written in the Bible,” said Waltzer.

Another reason why we want to settle Gaza is because I believe that this is the only thing that will bring peace,” he said.

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“We are a nation of peace, we only want peace. But I don’t think we have a partner for peace. The only way there will be quiet in Tel Aviv is if we settle Gaza — that is the only way they will feel defeated. The only thing they care about is land. [Taking it away] and settling there is the only thing that will make them feel that we have won and they have been defeated.”

Asked who should govern the Palestinian population of Gaza if Israel resettled the territory and annexed it as the ultranationalist parties seek, Waltzer endorsed Ben Gvir’s policy of “encouraging emigration.”

Oved Hugi, the head of the Likud’s Yad Eliyahu branch in Tel Aviv and one of the few not overtly religious participants in the conference, echoed Golan and Kallner in asserting that only stripping away Gazan territory from the Palestinians would serve as a sufficient deterrent from continuing the conflict with Israel.

Hugi advocated for lopping off northern Gaza from the coastal territory and allocating its land to the kibbutzim and other Israeli communities of the Gaza border region, for settlement and development, as well as maintaining Israeli control over the Philadelphi Corridor on the Gaza-Egypt border to prevent Hamas from rearming.

“The Arabs must lose territory in the war, so that they remember that they lost. For an act like this [the October 7 massacre], they must get the punishment of losing territory,” he said in the Likud sukkah set up at the event.

Cairo’s [“Summit for Peace”](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-chief-arab-leaders-call-for-end-to-israel-hamas-war-urge-peaceful-solution/) was meant to be a diplomatic breakthrough towards a ceasefire in Gaza, but its failure revealed what one analyst called the “fault lines” between Arab and Western states on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In their opening addresses Saturday, Arab leaders and Western delegates agreed on the need for aid to reach Palestinians in Gaza, besieged and under Israeli bombardment after the Hamas terror group’s devastating onslaught in southern communities on October 7.

But after hours of discussion, they found common ground on little else, with the meeting ending without a concluding statement.

(NAC), east of Cairo, on October 21, 2023. (Khaled DESOUKI/ AFP)

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“The disagreement was over condemning Israel, which Western states refused to do,” an Arab official told AFP, requesting anonymity because they are not authorized to speak to the media.

Instead, they sought a statement that placed “responsibility for the escalation on Hamas,” which Arab states refused, according to a different Arab diplomat.

War erupted after Hamas’s massacre, which saw some 2,500 terrorists break through the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air, and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing some 212 hostages of all ages under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.The vast majority of those killed as gunmen seized border communities were civilians — men, women, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists.

### ‘Dialogue of the deaf’

Though a number of Arab leaders condemned the loss of Israeli civilian life, they refused to place the onus on Hamas for the bloodshed.

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Arab states — some involved in the hostage negotiations with Hamas — would have been “in uncomfortable positions with their people” if they had signed on to the condemnation, the Arab official said.

Another point of contention, diplomats said, was Western diplomats wanting to call for the release of hostages abducted by Hamas.

Arab countries, with Qatar in the lead, have been negotiating their release in talks that could have been jeopardized if they signed alongside countries who have supported “Israel’s right to defend itself,”

With nothing left on the table, the meeting amounted to little more than a “dialogue of the deaf,” according to regional expert Karim Bitar, and ended quietly.

The sole statement released was one from the Egyptian presidency — drafted with the approval of Arab attendees, diplomats said — that said decades of band-aid diplomacy had failed to find “a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue.”

Israel has launched an offensive it says is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

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The campaign in Gaza has killed more than 4,600 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run health ministry, and reduced swaths of the densely populated territory to ruins. The Hamas-stated toll cannot be independently verified and is believed to include its own terrorists and gunmen, as well as victims of misfired Palestinian rockets that landed in the Strip.

In addition, Israel has said its forces killed about 1,500 Palestinian terrorists in its own territory following the October 7 invasion.

### ‘No to normalization’

The summit, Bitar told AFP, “perfectly illustrates the deepening fault lines between the West and the Arab world, and the Global South more broadly,” as decades have not dulled “the persistence of the Palestinian question.”

Though the list of Arab states with ties to Israel has grown in recent years, popular anti-Israel sentiment has remained strong.

[Mass protests](https://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-israel-demonstrations-held-across-muslim-world-amid-gaza-war-against-hamas/) in support of the Palestinians have erupted in the region and beyond, with Egyptians taking to Cairo’s iconic Tahrir Square on Friday for the first time in years after protests in the country were banned.

In Morocco — which along with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the 2020 US-brokered Abraham Accords, establishing diplomatic relations with Israel — tens of thousands of protesters chanted, “No to normalization.”

On what was dubbed the “Friday of Rage,” crowds in Bahrain chanted “Death to Israel!”

Across the Arab world, solidarity with Palestinians is still one of the few causes capable of rallying consensus and mobilizing political action.

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“Many have pushed against this centrality,” according to Bitar.

“For 20 years, we’ve been told to ‘move along, there is nothing to see here, it has become a minor, low-intensity conflict,'” he said.

### ‘Fall apart in our hands’

But the idea of “drowning out the Israeli-Palestinian question in an economic mega-deal between the Gulf and Israel” turned out to be a “pipe dream,” he continued.

Since hostilities began, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani — whose government is supported by Iran-backed factions — has condemned the “genocide” undertaken by “the Zionist occupier” on Palestinians.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi meanwhile sounded the alarm, warning that the region’s most fundamental peace deal — the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel — could “fall apart in our hands.”

King Abdullah II of Jordan — which became the second Arab state to recognize Israel in 1994 and hosts more than two million Palestinian refugees and their descendants — said on Saturday the war had revealed a culture of “global silence” on Palestinian death and suffering.

“The message the Arab world is hearing is loud and clear: Palestinian lives matter less than Israeli ones.”

After the abortive end to the Cairo summit, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna said world leaders “must work to put the Palestinian question at the center of concerns.”

Briefing reporters after the meeting, she said, “See you in six months” for the next “Summit for Peace.”

Biden said he had written on the photo of himself as a young senator and Netanyahu as an embassy hand: “Bibi, I love you. I don’t agree with a damn thing you say.'” He told donors at a Friday night fundraiser that Netanyahu still keeps the photo on his desk and had brought it up during Biden’s lightning visit to Tel Aviv last week.

As expectations grow that Israel will soon launch a ground offensive aimed at rooting out Hamas terrorists who rule the Gaza Strip, Biden finds himself facing anew the difficult balancing act of demonstrating full-throated support for America’s closet ally in the Middle East while trying to also press the Israelis to act with enough restraint to keep the war from spreading into a broader conflagration.

Biden has literally, and figuratively, wrapped Netanyahu in a warm embrace since Hamas’s devastating onslaught on October 7. He has repeatedly promised to have Israel’s back as it aims to take out the terror group that controls the Gaza Strip and which carried out the brutal massacre that killed at least 1,400 Israelis, the vast majority of them civilians.

The terrorists, who broke through the border under cover of a barrage of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities, also abducted at least 212 people of all ages, dragging them back to Gaza as hostages. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many in the process or the result of horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists, in what Biden has highlighted as “the worst massacre of the Jewish people since the Holocaust.”

A spokesperson for the government said more than 200,000 Israelis have been displaced by the conflict. The Defense Ministry is actively taking care of 120,000 of those who have left their homes.But Biden is increasingly paying greater public heed to the plight of Palestinians and the potential consequences of a hardline Israeli response.

White House officials say Biden, during his visit to Tel Aviv last week, asked Netanyahu “tough” questions about his strategy and the way forward. Biden himself told reporters on his way back from Israel that he had a “long talk” with Israeli officials “about what the alternatives are” to a possible extended ground operation. US defense officials were also consulting with Israel on the matter.

Airport on October 18, 2023. (Brendan SMIALOWSKI / AFP)

US President Joe Biden told a crowd of Democratic donors over the weekend about a decades-old photo he took with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, an aside that seemed intended to illustrate his long support of Israel and track record of speaking bluntly with the right-wing Israeli leader.

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Some remains of Kibbutz Be’eri, destroyed by Hamas’s deadly onslaught on October 7, photographed on October 20, 2023. (Carrie Keller-Lynn/The Times of Israel)

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“We’re going to make sure other hostile actors in the region know that Israel is stronger than ever and prevent this conflict from spreading,” Biden said Thursday in a nationally televised address on assisting Israel and Ukraine in their wars. “At the same time… Netanyahu and I discussed again yesterday the critical need for Israel to operate by the laws of war. That means protecting civilians in combat as best as they can.”

The pressure on Biden for a balanced approach comes from Arab leaders in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and beyond who have seen large protests erupt in their capitals over the crisis in Gaza. It also comes from European officials, who have expressed horror at the most brutal massacre on Israeli soil in decades, but also underscored that the Israelis must abide by international and humanitarian law. Biden also faces scrutiny from people in the younger and more liberal wing of his Democratic Party, who are more divided over the Israel-Palestinian issue than the party’s centrist and older leaders.

Less than a week into the war, dozens of lawmakers wrote to Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging them to ensure the protection of Israeli and Palestinian civilians by calling for Israeli military operations to follow the rules of international humanitarian law, the safe return of hostages, and diplomatic efforts to ensure long-lasting peace. That was followed by more than a dozen lawmakers introducing a resolution urging the Biden administration to call for an immediate de-escalation and ceasefire.

Three members of the Democratic caucus — Reps. Delia Ramirez of Illinois, Summer Lee of Pennsylvania, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan — wrote to Blinken last week about the “lack of meaningful information” about the status of US civilians, particularly those in Gaza and the West Bank. The administration has said some 500 to 600 US citizens may be in Gaza.

Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota has suggested that the administration has demonstrated a double standard when it comes to valuing the lives of innocent Israelis and Gaza residents.

Israel’s bombing campaign in Gaza has killed more than 4,600 Palestinians, mainly civilians, according to the Hamas-run health ministry, and reduced swaths of the densely populated territory to ruins. The Hamas-stated toll cannot be independently verified and is believed to include its own terrorists and gunmen, as well as victims of a blast at a Gaza City hospital on October 17 caused by an Islamic Jihad misfired missile aimed at Israel, which Hamas blamed on Israel. Israel has produced evidence showing the blast was caused by a Gazan rocket that fell short. The United States, also citing its own data, has endorsed the Israeli account.

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In addition, Israel has said its forces killed about 1,500 Palestinian terrorists in its own territory following the October 7 invasion.

Israel says its airstrikes are targeting all areas where Hamas operates while aiming to minimize civilian casualties, and its goal following the terror group’s murderous rampage across southern Israel is to destroy its ability to govern Gaza.

“How do you look at one atrocity and say, ‘This is wrong,’ but you watch as bodies pile up as neighborhoods are leveled?” Omar asked at a news conference. “Israel has dropped more bombs in the last 10 days than we dropped in a whole year in Afghanistan. Where is your humanity? Where is your outrage? Where is your care for people?”

Inside the administration, there has been debate over whether Biden is pursuing a policy too closely aligned with Israel’s.

Last week, at least one department official resigned, saying he could no longer support what he called a “one-sided” policy that favors Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.

“I cannot work in support of a set of major policy decisions, including rushing more arms to one side of the conflict, that I believe to be short-sighted, destructive, unjust and contradictory to the very values that we publicly espouse,” Josh Paul, an 11-year veteran of the State Department’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, wrote in a statement posted to his LinkedIn account on Wednesday.

Other State Department officials have expressed similar concerns and some of them spoke at a series of internal discussions for employees that were held on Friday, according to people familiar with the events who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations. Many of those comments were angry and emotional, these people said.

Blinken sent a department-wide memo Thursday urging employees to remember the administration’s broader goals for equal justice and peace for both Israel and the Palestinians.

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Biden administration officials, meanwhile, in their interactions with their Israeli counterparts have witnessed trauma — and rage — that is palpable.

The most significant announcement to come out of Biden’s visit to Israel this past week was getting Egypt and Israel to agree to allow a limited number of trucks carrying food, water, medicine, and other essentials into Gaza via the Rafah border crossing.

While the agreement to allow [some aid](https://www.timesofisrael.com/1st-aid-trucks-enter-gaza-as-number-of-confirmed-hostages-held-in-strip-reaches-210/?utm_source=article_hpsidebar&utm_medium=desktop_site) into Gaza appeared to be minor, considering the enormity of the humanitarian crisis, US officials said it represented a significant concession in the position Israel held before Blinken’s meeting with Netanyahu on Monday and Biden’s talks with the Israeli leader on Wednesday.

During the Blinken-Netanyahu talks, US officials familiar with the discussions said they had become increasingly alarmed by comments from their Israeli counterparts about their intention to deny even supplies of water, electricity, fuel, food, and medicine into Gaza, as well as the inevitability of civilian casualties.

Those comments, according to four US officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe private conversations, reflected intense anguish, anger, and outright hostility toward all Palestinians in Gaza.

The officials said that members of the Israeli security and political establishment were absolutely opposed to the provision of any assistance to Gazans and argued that the eradication of Hamas would require methods used in the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II.

One official said that he and others had heard from Israeli counterparts that “a lot of innocent Germans died in World War II” and had been reminded of the massive deaths of Japanese civilians in the US nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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Similarly, Biden and his top aides heard deep anguish from some of the high-ranking Israeli officials involved in the private talks, according to a US official familiar with the matter.

As he [wrapped up his 7.5-hour visit to Tel Aviv](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-to-israelis-justice-must-be-done-but-dont-let-rage-guide-wartime-decisions/), Biden compared the October 7 assault to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States that killed nearly 3,000 people and he recalled the rage Americans felt and the desire for justice by many in the United States. He also urged the Israelis to remember American missteps after 9/11, an era that left the US military ensconced in a 20-year war in Afghanistan.

“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. And while we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes.”

Some 200,000 Israelis have been internally displaced in the ongoing Israel-Hamas following the terror group’s October 7 massacre in southern Israel, and amid escalating skirmishes on the Lebanon border in the north with terror group Hezbollah and allied Palestinian factions, according to Israeli authorities.

About half of the 200,000 were instructed to evacuate from 105 communities near the Gaza and Lebanon borders in the south and north, while half left areas close to the front of their own volition, a spokesperson for the Prime Minister’s Office said Sunday.

The Defense Ministry, through its National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), said it was giving services to about 120,000 displaced Israelis ordered to evacuate from 25 communities up to four kilometers from the Gaza Strip, and from another [28 communities](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-to-evacuate-civilians-from-28-communities-along-lebanese-border-amid-attacks/) up to two kilometers from the Lebanon border, according to a Defense Ministry announcement.

northern border from Lebanon, October 22, 2023. (David Cohen/Flash90)

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According to ministry officials, the numbers are broken down into two main categories: people who have been fully evacuated from their homes, and people who are eligible “to rest and refresh themselves” at state-subsidized guesthouses temporarily.

NEMA has also been working to evacuate some 23,000 Israelis from the northern city of Kiryat Shmona in recent days amid an uptick in attacks on the northern border. NEMA announced Sunday morning that it would [evacuate another 14 towns](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-evacuate-14-more-communities-on-lebanon-border-amid-hezbollah-attacks/) near the Lebanon border, comprising another 11,000 residents

Separately, some 36,000 residents of Sderot and 18,000 Israelis living in 29 towns between four and seven kilometers from Gaza are eligible to go and “rest and refresh themselves” for a week at state-subsidized guesthousesThe state will be responsible for these Israelis until the military allows them to return to what is now a closed military zone near the Gaza border and a restricted area near Lebanon.

Ministry officials said not all of those living in those areas have taken the opportunity to leave at this stage. Additionally, many Israelis have evacuated their homes near the northern and southern borders, despite not being ordered to, according to the ministry.

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Meanwhile, hotel rooms across the country are limited in number and chaos has been registered in the evacuation plan as it gets underway, according to Hebrew media reports.

According to Ynet, there are currently some 56,000 hotel rooms that meet the criteria for hosting people and families displaced by the war, as many hotels are closed and some are not suitable for hosting during wartime.

The Israel Hotels Association (IHA) said the supply of available rooms was running out and that the organization was “scrambling for free rooms all over the country in accordance with the government’s requirements.”

The IHA said an operation center launched together with the Tourism Ministry, which works closely with the hospitality industry, was working “24/7 and responds to all government requests,” adding that “this is a challenging period,” according to a statement cited by Ynet.

Two of Israel’s largest hotel chains, Isrotel and Fattal, said they have worked since the beginning of the war to accommodate government requests to host displaced Israelis.

Also Sunday, the Welfare Ministry said that at least 21 children in 13 families have been left with no parents after they were murdered by terrorists during the Hamas onslaught.

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One of them is a 4-year-old girl held hostage in Gaza. Another young girl’s mother was murdered and her father is being held captive, the ministry said.

Social workers with the ministry are working to identify all such children and provide them and their guardians with all the resources necessary, the ministry added.

Israel is more than two weeks into a war with Hamas after the Iran-backed terror group’s murderous assault on the country on October 7, in which some 2,500 terrorists streamed into Israel by land, sea, and air, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and injuring thousands more. The terror group and other factions dragged over 200 hostages of all ages into Gaza.

Israel says its campaign in Gaza is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

In the north, Hamas ally Hezbollah, also an Iranian proxy, has fired dozens of anti-tank guided missiles, rockets, and mortars at Israeli military positions and Israeli towns since the October 7 Hamas onslaught, while also sending gunmen — some affiliated with Palestinian terror groups — to infiltrate into northern Israel.

Several drones have also been intercepted over northern Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [warned](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-to-troops-if-hezbollah-enters-the-war-its-making-the-mistake-of-its-life/) Hezbollah on Sunday that it would be “making the mistake of its life” if it decided to enter the war.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken Blinken urged members of the UN Security Council on Tuesday to consider “humanitarian pauses” in the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza in order to protect Palestinian civilians.

The remark was the first time a US official has publicly called for any sort of stoppage to the fighting. The proposal falls short of a ceasefire, which US officials have rejected in recent days as a step that would amount to help for Hamas, arguing that Israel still has a right to forcefully respond in order to ensure that it cannot repeat its October 7 massacres in Israeli communities.

“Palestinian civilians must be protected. That means Hamas must cease using them as human shields. It’s hard to think of an act of greater cynicism,” Blinken said during the ministerial Security Council gathering to discuss the Gaza war.

“It means Israel must take all possible precautions to avoid harm to civilians. It means food, water, medicine and other essential humanitarian assistance must be able to flow into Gaza and to the people who need it. It means civilians must be able to get out of harm’s way. It means humanitarian pauses must be considered for these purposes,” the secretary of state added.

Along with its military campaign, Israel has imposed a near-total blockade of Gaza, though some humanitarian aid has been permitted to enter from Egypt in recent days under a US-brokered deal.

“But [that] is a drop of aid in an ocean of need,” US Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said at the meeting and cautioned that if Gaza runs out of fuel it will be a “disaster.”The UN has warned that hospitals and other vital services in the Palestinian territory risked shutting down without fuel deliveries.

Israel worries that Hamas would use fuel brought into Gaza to manufacture weapons and explosives and says that the terror group has already stolen fuel intended for humanitarian purposes.

Blinken went on to call out much of the international community for failing to explicitly condemn the October 7 Hamas terror onslaught that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, the vast majority of them civilians.

Blinken said that in his conversations with world leaders since the assault, there has been agreement that countries have a right and obligation to respond to terror attacks against their civilians, but indicated that not all of them have publicly acknowledged such support for Israel.

“It must be asked: Where’s the outrage? Where’s the revulsion? Where’s the rejection? Where’s the explicit condemnation of these horrors?” Blinken asked, referring to Hamas atrocities committed during its assault.

On October 7, Hamas abruptly bombarded Israel with thousands of rockets while over 2,500 gunmen breached the border with the Gaza Strip. The terrorists rampaged murderously through southern areas slaughtering those they found, butchering entire families in some communities and also killing 260 at an outdoor music festival. Some victims were mutilated, raped, and tortured. Dozens of children were killed. Before the IDF could counter the invasion, over 220 people of all ages were abducted and dragged back to Gaza as captives. Four have since been released.

The secretary called on countries to do everything in their power to secure the release of the remaining hostages in Gaza.

Israel has responded to the Hamas assault by vowing to destroy the terror group and launching intensive strikes in Gaza, saying it is hitting terror targets while trying to avoid civilian casualties. It has told over one million Gaza residents to evacuate the northern part of the Strip ahead of an expected ground incursion. Hamas has continued to rain rockets on southern and central Israel while also attempting further terror infiltrations.

The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry says the Israeli strikes have killed over 5,700 Palestinians so far. Those numbers cannot be independently verified and are believed to include Hamas’s own members, as well as civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rocketsAnother concern is that Iran’s proxies in Lebanon and Syria will try to open northern fronts in the war against Israel. There have been repeated deadly skirmishes between the IDF and the Hezbollah terror group along the Lebanese border as well as rocket attacks on northern bases and civilian communities. Rockets have also been fired from Syria.

US troops have been attacked in Iraq and in Syria with drones and rockets in separate incidents over the past week. A group of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq warned that US forces “must leave immediately” or their bases in Iraq and elsewhere in the region will continue to come under attack.

Blinken told the Security Council that while the US does not seek conflict with Iran, it will respond if Tehran or its proxies attack US personnel. “Make no mistake. We will defend our people. We will defend our security swiftly and decisively.”

Blinken urged Security Council members to call out Iran for its malign regional activity and to warn it, as Washington has, not to open another front against Israel.

“Act as if the security and stability of the entire region and beyond is on the line, because it is,” Blinken told members.

He closed by urging members to “redouble our collective effort” to work toward a two-state solution following the outbreak of the war in Gaza.

“The only road to lasting peace and security in the region, the only way to break out of this horrific cycle of violence is through two states for two peoples,” Blinken said, acknowledging that it will be difficult“Nothing would be a greater victory for Hamas, than allowing its brutality to send us down the path of terrorism and nihilism. We must not let it. Hamas does not get to choose for us,” Blinken said, adding that the path the US and the world should choose is one where the region is more integrated and “normalized” — hinting at efforts to broker an Israel-Saudi agreement.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with soldiers on the northern border and issues words of warning to the Hezbollah terror group amid repeated clashes on the border with Lebanon.

“If Hezbollah decides to enter the war, it will long for the Second Lebanon War,” Netanyahu says, according to his office, referencing Israel’s 2006 war with Lebanon. “It will be making the mistake of its life. We will strike it with strength that it cannot even imagine and the significance to it and to the country of Lebanon will be devastating.”

Netanyahu tells the soldiers that “I know that you lost friends, and it’s a very difficult thing, but we are in the fight of our life, a fight for our home. That’s not an exaggeration, it’s not an overstatement, that’s this war. It is kill or be killed, and they need to be killed.”

As sirens sounded in central Israel on Saturday evening, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that the second stage of the campaign to destroy Hamas had begun with an expanding ground offensive into the Gaza Strip.

Projecting an image of unity alongside Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and fellow war cabinet minister Benny Gantz at a Tel Aviv press conference, Netanyahu announced: “This is the second stage of the war whose goals are clear — to destroy Hamas’ governing and military capabilities and to bring the hostages home.”

He added that the decision to begin ground operations had been made unanimously, both by the war cabinet and the security cabinet.

“Broadening the ground offensive does not clash in any way with our ability to return the hostages,” he argued.

He was also asked about a potential [“all for all” deal](https://www.timesofisrael.com/meeting-netanyahu-families-of-gaza-hostages-urge-all-for-all-prisoner-swap/) that would see all Hamas-held hostages freed and all Palestinian security prisoners in Israeli jails released, a notion Hamas leaders have increasingly called for.

“We are discussing the issue,” he said, without going into details, and added that he cannot share intelligence and considerations that the cabinet is debating. Discussing the terms of a potential deal publicly “will not help to realize” oneGround forces, including infantry, combat engineering forces and tanks, entered Gaza on Friday night and remained there on Saturday, operating deeper inside the Hamas-run territory than previous limited incursions.

“Our commanders and soldiers fighting in enemy territory know that the nation and the national leadership stand behind them,”

Netanyahu said troops that he has met in the field are determined to make Hamas pay for its actions on October 7.

“They are determined to eradicate this evil from the world, for our existence and, I add — for all of humanity.”

Netanyahu continued: “We always said, ‘Never Again’. Never Again’ is now.”

The prime called the abduction of the hostages — including civilians of all ages — “a crime against humanity.”

And he denounced those who “dare to accuse our soldiers of war crimes” as hypocrites and liars.

“The IDF is the most moral army in the world; the IDF does everything to avoid harm to non-combatants,” he said, again calling on residents of northern Gaza to head to the southern Gaza Strip, as Israel has repeatedly done in recent weeks.

Netanyahu accused Hamas of war crimes, saying it “uses citizens as human shields,” uses hospitals as terror headquarters and takes fuel meant for hospitals to supply its war.

On Saturday, the army said it would start allowing significantly more humanitarian aid to enter the southern Gaza Strip from Egypt.

The IDF hopes that the additional food, water and medical supplies will encourage more Palestinians to leave the northern part of the Gaza Strip for the south.

Israel has repeatedly warned that it is heavily targeting Gaza City and other areas in northern Gaza, where Hamas is believed to have its main bases of operations and extensive underground installations, many of them located under the city. The IDF says it will not allow fuel into the Gaza Strip, as it says it is used by Hamas to manage the fighting against Israel.

Netanyahu said the initial stage of the war — launched after Hamas terrorists burst through the border fence and slaughtered 1,400 Israelis, over a thousand of them civilians, on October 7 — had been a massive air campaign “to allow our ground forces to go in as safely as possible.”

“We eliminated countless murderers, including mass murderers. We destroyed countless headquarters and terrorist infrastructure. We are only at the beginning,”

Netanyahu added that the war will be “long and hard, and we are ready. It is our second War of Independence. We will fight to defend the homeland. We will fight and we will not withdraw.”

“Israel is fighting not only its war, but humanity’s war against the barbarians,” he said.

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“Our allies in the Western world, and our partners in the Arab world, know that if we do not win, they are next in line in the campaign of conquest and murder from the axis of evil,” he says.

He characterized the war as one of “light over darkness, life over death. This is the mission of our lives and my life.”

Taking his first questions from reporters since the Hamas massacres, Netanyahu refused to directly answer whether he bears responsibility for the Palestinian terror group’s deadly onslaught.

“After the war everyone will have to give answers, myself included,” he said, repeating comments he made earlier in the week.

But, he stressed, “There was an awful debacle.”

He also refused to commit to setting up a state commission of inquiry — the most powerful and consequential investigative panel — to investigate the failings that enabled the Hamas atrocities. “There will not be a stone left unturned,” he said, adding that his focus right now was only on winning and “saving the state.”

Netanyahu was also asked whether his government’s judicial overhaul efforts had distracted attention from security challenges, and said the legislative proposals to weaken the courts are “no longer on the agenda,” and that disagreements had been resolved in the face of war.

Responding to a question about Iran’s involvement in the October 7 attacks, Netanyahu said: “Iran supports Hamas… provides over 90% of Hamas’s budget. It finances, it organizes, it directs, it guides.

“I cannot tell you for certain that in this specific operation, at this particular moment, they were involved in the micro-planning.”

But, he added, there was no Hamas without Iran, and no Hezbollah either. “That’s the axis of evil, against the free world and the moderates in the Arab world.”

### Shaking the ground in Gaza

Speaking after Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that not a moment goes by when he is not thinking about the hostages, and that Israel is doing everything it can to bring them back. “It is not a secondary mission,” he said.

Gallant argued that the harder Israel hits Hamas, the greater the chances Hamas will agree to release hostages, something Netanyahu and Gantz also asserted.

“Over the last day, we advanced to a new stage” in the war, Gallant said. “The strength of the fire shook the ground in Gaza, and it’s different than anything Hamas has experienced since its creation.

“IDF forces are maneuvering in the relevant places, and are striking Hamas arrays right now, above ground and underground.”

“Hamas is suffering shocks it has never suffered,” he said.

Gallant said Israeli forces in Gaza are receiving all the intelligence and supportive fire they need, adding that the operation is precise, lethal and extremely powerful.

He added he “has full faith” in the IDF chief of staff, the heads of Shin Bet and Mossad, and the soldiers in the field.

“It will not be a short war. It will be a long war,” he said.

“It is us or them.”

### No time limit

Gantz, a former IDF chief of staff and defense minister, took the microphone last, saying that “there is no diplomatic time limit, only an operational clock.”

Past IDF operations have come to a close as world pressure on Israel, including from allies, increased.

“We will do what is right for us,” he pledged, calling on the world to keep up the pressure on Hamas.

“This is total evil against total justice. And justice will win,” he said.

Gantz echoed Netanyahu’s prior comment that is Israel is fighting a second war of independence, saying the country will fight “where it must, and when it must.”

“We will end up not only stronger, but also more united.”

Gantz said that the war would be a multi-stage effort with significant sacrifices, and that it would take a long time to win on the battlefield and to rehabilitate the south.

Responding to a final question from the press, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said the internal relations within the war cabinet are fine. “The prime minister, Minister Gantz, the ministers in the security cabinet, the war cabinet, are conducting discussions that are to the point, good and professional interpersonal relations, and in the end, we are united behind one goal, to bring the victory.”

Gazan terrorists have launched thousands of rockets at Israel since October 7, killing and wounding dozens, and sending hundreds of thousands running for shelter, and the education of hundreds of thousands of children has been disrupted as schools remain shut or operate in a limited format.“destruction of Hamas’s military and governing capabilities; and returning the hostages home.”

Netanyahu says the decision to begin the ground incursion was made unanimously, both by the war cabinet and the security cabinet.

“Our commanders and soldiers fighting in enemy territory know that the nation and the national leadership stand behind them,” he adds.

Netanyahu says the troops that he has met in the field are determined to make Hamas pay for its actions on October 7.

“They are determined to eradicate this evil from the world, for our existence and, I add, for all of humanity,” he says.

The premier quotes the biblical injunction to remember what the Amalekites did to the Israelites. “We remember, and we are fighting.”

Netanyahu says the soldiers are part of a legacy of Jewish warriors that goes back 3,000 years. He stresses that they have one goal: “To defeat the murderous enemy, and to ensure our existence in our land.”

The new sanctions highlight Iran’s role in providing financial, logistical and operational support to Hamas, the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control said in a statement.

They include a Hamas representative in Iran and members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard.

The sanctions were announced as Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo travelled to London to shore up support from Britain, one of America’s closest allies, for the drive to squeeze off funding for Hamas, which both countries consider a terrorist organization.

“Today’s action underscores the United States’ commitment to dismantling Hamas’s funding networks by deploying our counterterrorism sanctions authorities and working with our global partners to deny Hamas the ability to exploit the international financial system,”

Among those targeted are Khaled Qaddoumi, described as a liaison between Hamas and the Iranian government, and Ali Morshed Shirazi and Mostafa Mohammad Khani, officials in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force who are accused of training and assisting Hamas terrorists.The US also sanctioned a number of organizations, including the Iranian Bonyad Shahid, also known as the Martyrs Foundation. US officials said the group, which is affiliated with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, funnels millions of dollars through the Gaza-based Al-Ansar Charity Association for the families of terrorists.

The practice “ultimately serves as a recruiting tool for terrorist activities,” the US said.

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The sanctions freeze any US-based assets owned or controlled by the named individuals and organizations. They also block financial transactions with those designated and prohibit the contribution of funds, goods and services to them.

Most of the international funding for the Gazan terror groups comes from Iran, which has sponsored Hamas with some $100 million annually and the PIJ to the tune of tens of millions, according to Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

Hamas has also received over $1.5 billion in disbursements from Qatar over the past decade. The funds are officially aimed at covering salaries for public workers, fuel purchases and transfers to poor families, but the terror group deducts part of the payments and keeps it for its own operations.

Israel has repeatedly accused Iran of being a key force behind the coordinated Hamas attack on Israel, in which terrorists streamed across the border to carry out a devastating assault on nearby communities, killing some 1,400 people, and taking over 220 people hostage. The vast majority of those killed as gunmen seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists.

Israel says its war against Hamas is aimed at destroying the Iran-backed terror group’s infrastructure and has vowed to dismantle the organization after the massacres while minimizing harm to Gaza’s civilians. The IDF has been calling on Palestinians to evacuate from northern Gaza southward, as it intensifies strikes in the Gaza City area.

The cost of the war between Israel and the Hamas terror group is estimated to be at least NIS 27 billion ($6.8 billion) as of now, according to initial projections by Bank Hapoalim.

That takes into account the significant and massive call of 300,000 [reserve soldiers](https://www.timesofisrael.com/heavy-rocket-fire-on-central-southern-israel-300000-reservists-mobilized-in-48-hours/) who must leave their jobs — the largest mobilization since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Israel called up 400,000 reservists — restoration of infrastructure, housing and parts of the army, the expectation of a long campaign, and multiyear costs of rehabilitating disabled soldiers and caring for the families of fallen soldiers.

“As of the present time, it is very difficult to know how the war will develop – whether it will trigger a ground campaign to conquer parts of Gaza that will take many weeks, or whether a campaign will also be launched in the north and how long the reservists be called up for duty,” said Bank Hapoalim chief strategist Modi Shafrir. “At present time it can be assumed (in a very rough estimate) that the costs of the current war will amount to at least 1.5% of GDP, which means an increase in the budget deficit of at least 1.5% of GDP in the coming year.”

October 9, 2023. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

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Israel’s past wars, such as the 2006 Second Lebanon War, paralyzed part of the country due to rocket barrages, but did not last as long to completely shut down the entire economy. After missiles stopped and troops, reservists came back home, the country’s economy in the post-war period managed to bounce back and recover relatively quickly

“Past experience shows that the impact of the war on GDP is expected to be felt mainly in private consumption and tourism figures but the very large mobilization of the reserve forces and the assessment that the current war will last many weeks, are expected to incur more direct damage to Israel’s economy compared to previous combat operation rounds,”Since the surprise assault by the Hamas on Saturday, in which the terrorists swept through communities in southern Israel massacring hundreds of civilians, and Israel subsequently declared a state of war, local stocks and bonds fell, and many businesses and schools in the country remain closed, while airlines have stopped most flights to Tel Aviv. Israel’s central bank said this week that it will [sell](https://www.timesofisrael.com/bank-of-israel-to-sell-30-billion-to-stop-shekel-collapse-during-gaza-war/) up to $30 billion in foreign exchange to prop up the shekel and prevent its collapse. Despite the central bank’s announcement, the local currency has weakened more than 2% over the past two days and is trading around NIS 3.95 per US dollar.

On Tuesday, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that the world economy faces new uncertainty from the war between Israel and Hamas militants and could see fallout from the Middle East conflict — particularly to oil prices.

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The IMF said it expects global economic growth to slow to 2.9% in 2024 from an expected 3% this year. The forecast for next year is down a notch from the 3% it predicted back in July. That’s as the world has yet to fully recover from a short-lived COVID-19 recession and is reeling from the impact of higher interest rates and the invasion of Ukraine.

It’s “too early” to assess the impact on global economic growth from the days-old war between Israel and Hamas, IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said at a news conference. He said the IMF was “monitoring the situation closely” and noted that oil prices have risen by about 4% in the past several days.

“We’ve seen that in previous crises and previous conflicts. And of course, this reflects the potential risk that there could be disruption either in production or transport of oil in the region,” he said.

As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu already cautioned to expect a prolonged and difficult war until the government’s objectives are reached, the country’s economy, although still fairly robust, is on a downward growth trend.

Since the start of the year, the advancement of the contentious judicial overhaul has led to a slowdown in investments into the high-tech sector, the country’s main growth engine, and a weakening of the shekel exchange rate. High interest rates hikes, rising inflation and expectations of a slowdown in the global economy are also weighing on local growth.

Before the outbreak of the war, the Bank of Israel saw the economy growing at a rate of 3% in each of the years 2023 and 2024, after it expanded by more than 6% last year.

In August, Israel’s fiscal deficit [widened](https://www.timesofisrael.com/fiscal-state-deficit-widens-to-1-3-exceeding-government-target/) to 1.3% of GDP, or NIS 23.1 billion ($6 billion), over the prior 12 months, as state revenue from taxes continued to slide and government expenditure increased. The deficit has swelled above the government’s fiscal deficit target for this year of around 1.1% as the government [approved](https://www.timesofisrael.com/cabinet-approves-nis-13-7b-in-state-funds-to-meet-haredi-coalition-demands/) the allocation of billions of shekels in state funds to meet Haredi coalition demands.

More government spending will now be needed for the military campaign, which could mean that additional funds will have to be borrowed in a high interest rate environment and taxes could be raised, weighing on the economy.

Hamas sent a large group of women and children to act as human shields against Israel Defense Forces troops who were attacking a key compound of the terror group in the Gaza Strip, according to soldiers.

Two IDF soldiers were killed in the Tuesday assault on Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion compound, located in the Jabaliya refugee camp inside Gaza. Israel is battling to destroy Hamas and end its rule over the Strip after the group’s devastating terror attack earlier this month that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, mostly civilians.

According to a report Thursday by the Ynet news site, Hamas sent a group of 100 women and children to act as human shields to protect the compound.

“We are prepared for more incidents of such cynical and blatant use of the population,” said an unnamed IDF officer who apparently witnessed the incident.

The report did not say how troops dealt with the situation, but the compound was captured by the IDF

The army said the large amount of intelligence material seized from the base is already aiding in other Gaza battles, according to the report.

An initial investigation found that IDF Sgt. Roei Wolf and Staff Sgt. Lavi Lipshitz, both 20, [were killed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-idf-soldiers-killed-in-gaza-as-troops-take-hamas-post-kill-commander-50-terrorists/) as forces were withdrawing from the compound. Palestinians fired an anti-tank missile that hit a wall of the building, killing the soldiers and injuring others. The remaining soldiers returned fire while an evacuation operation was carried out.

Around 50 Hamas fighters were killed during ground operations on Tuesday, according to the IDF.

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Israel has repeatedly said Hamas is using civilians as human shields, including by locating operations bases [under hospitals](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamass-main-operations-base-is-under-shifa-hospital-in-gaza-city-says-idf/). Captured Hamas terrorists have [confirmed the claims](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-interrogation-video-hamas-terrorists-confirm-groups-hideout-under-gaza-hospital/), explaining that Hamas knows Israel will not bomb a medical center.

US President Joe Biden [has also said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-says-hamas-using-innocent-gazans-as-human-shields-calls-netanyahu-pas-abbas/) that Hamas is using civilians as human shields.

The war was sparked on October 7, when some 3,000 terrorists led by Hamas burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing over 1,400 people under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

The vast majority of those killed as terrorists seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists. In addition, more than 240 people of all ages were abducted and taken back to Gaza as captives.

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s military infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

The military has also said it is taking care not to bomb areas where hostages are believed to be held, Ynet reported.

In the weeks since the massacre, Hamas and other terror groups have continued to rain rockets on Israel, including from Lebanon in the north, causing further deaths and injuries. Over 200,000 Israelis have been displaced due to the rocket fire and over a million have frequently been forced into bomb shelters for safety.

According to the Hamas-run health ministry, more than 8,700 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which cannot be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh has called on US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to use his current Middle East tour to end Israel’s “aggression” as war rages in Gaza.

The top US diplomat arrived in Turkey on Friday at the start of a trip that includes planned visits to Israel and the West Bank as well as several Arab and Gulf states.

US officials have said that Blinken, in his fourth regional tour since fighting erupted with Hamas’s October 7 assault on Israel, would focus on getting more aid into the Strip

In a video message posted late Friday on Hamas’s social media channels, Haniyeh, who lives in exile, said he hoped Blinken had “learned the lessons of the last three months.”

The war was sparked by the October 7 onslaught, when some 3,000 Hamas-led terrorists burst into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, most of them civilians slaughtered in their home communities and at a music festival amid brutal atrocities, and seizing an estimated 240 hostages.

conflict with Israel, November 1, 2023. (Screenshot, Hamas Telegram channel)

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In response, Israel vowed to destroy Hamas and launched a wide-scale military campaign in Gaza aimed at destroying the group’s military and governance capabilities and returning the hostages.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza says at least 22,700 people have been killed in the Strip since the war erupted on October 7. The Hamas figure does not differentiate between civilians and combatants and includes Palestinians killed by errant rocket fire from Gaza. Israel says it has killed 8,500 terrorists since launching the war.

US support for Israel’s military campaign “has caused unprecedented massacres and war crimes against our people in Gaza,” Haniyeh said.

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“We… hope that he will be more focused this time on ending the aggression” as well as “the occupation of all Palestinian lands,” the Qatar-based Hamas chief added.

Haniyeh also urged regional leaders due to meet Blinken to tell him that stability in the Middle East was “closely linked to our Palestinian cause.”

The United States is Israel’s chief military and political backer and has repeatedly refused to support calls for a ceasefire.

However, Washington has lent its support to humanitarian pauses and backed a UN Security Council resolution demanding more aid be let into Gaza.

The Israel Defense Forces said Saturday it carried out a limited raid in the southern Gaza Strip overnight, as troops continued to push forward with their offensive against the Hamas terror group in the northern part of the enclave.

While the military has focused its activities in northern Gaza, it has also carried out limited raids in the southern Strip to prepare the area for future stages of the war.

The IDF said the operation, carried out by combat engineering forces and tanks, led by the Gaza Division, was to map out buildings and to clear the area of planted explosive devices.

IDF troops operating in the Gaza Strip in a picture released November 4, 2023. (Israel Defense Forces)

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While the military has focused its activities in northern Gaza, it has also carried out limited raids in the southern Strip to prepare the area for future stages of the war.

The IDF said the operation, carried out by combat engineering forces and tanks, led by the Gaza Division, was to map out buildings and to clear the area of planted explosive devices.

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It said that during the operation, troops encountered a Hamas cell that came out of a tunnel. Troops shelled the operatives, killing them, the IDF said.

Meanwhile, Palestinians in Gaza reported Israeli airstrikes overnight and into Saturday across the enclave, including the southern part of the Strip.

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AP reported that Israeli military strikes killed multiple civilians at a UN shelter and hospital in the main combat zone in northern Gaza. The UN agency for Palestinian refugees said two strikes hit a UN school-turned-shelter just north of Gaza City, killing several people in tents in the schoolyard and women who were baking bread inside the building.

It was not clear how the news agency determined the strike was Israeli (Palestinian rocket misfires have also caused multiple civilian casualties in Gaza).

The IDF did not immediately comment, but generally says it targets Hamas terror infrastructure — a vast network of posts, command centers, weapons caches and tunnels — which is embedded within the civilian population. The army has urged residents of northern Gaza to move south as it intensifies its activity in the Gaza City area.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled to the south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned because Israel is also carrying out some airstrikes in the south.

Palestinian media reported that Israel also bombed a house belonging to Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh in the Al-Shathi neighborhood of the city.

The reports said that a missile was fired at the home. There were no immediate reports of casualties in the strike, and no comment from the IDF.

While Haniyeh lives in exile in Qatar, the home was being used by two of his sons, senior Hamas official Ghazi Hamad told The Associated Press.

Earlier in the war, Palestinian media reported that 14 of Haniyeh’s relatives were killed in an Israeli airstrike on another family home in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood.

At the same time as the aerial bombardment, the IDF pushed forward with its ground offensive in the northern part of the enclave, with infantry and tanks encountering numerous attempts by Hamas operatives to come out of tunnels to attack troops.

The forces killed several gunmen and located the tunnels, which will be later destroyed, the IDF said

In one encounter, the IDF said ground forces fought off a group of 15 Hamas operatives, killing several of them, and shelling their observation posts.

The IDF did not immediately provide new information on potential casualties.

Since the start of the ground offensive last week, 24 soldiers have been killed. A total of 341 troops have been killed since October 7.

Conquering Gaza City, the enclave’s largest city and a stronghold of the Strip’s Hamas rulers, will be a daunting task for Israel’s military, whose mission to oust the terror group will force soldiers to fight through the crowded urban labyrinth thought awash with bombs and booby traps and undercut by a vast network of tunnels the terror group’s operatives will use to ambush troops.

On Friday evening the IDF confirmed it carried out an airstrike on an ambulance in northern Gaza which it said was identified as being used by a Hamas cell, close to a battle zone.

Hospital directors of three hospitals asserted strikes hit just as staff were trying to evacuate wounded to the south. Footage showed the aftermath outside Gaza’s largest hospital, Shifa, where more than a dozen bloodied bodies of men, women and young children were strewn next to damaged cars and ambulances.

“A number of Hamas terrorist operatives were killed in the strike,” the IDF said, adding that it would release further information soon. It said that “more detailed information” on the strike had already been shared with allies.

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“We have information which demonstrates that Hamas’s method of operation is to transfer terror operatives and weapons in ambulances,” the IDF said. “We emphasize that this area is a battle zone. Civilians in the area are repeatedly called upon to evacuate southwards for their own safety.”

The military has said Hamas’s main base of operations is located within and under Shifa Hospital, and that it similarly uses other hospitals for cover.

A senior Biden administration official [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-tried-to-send-fighters-to-egypt-in-ambulances-for-wounded-gazans-us-official/) Friday that Hamas tried to sneak its fighters out of the Gaza Strip in ambulances that evacuated dozens of wounded Palestinians to Egypt earlier this week.

Hamas had compiled a list of the seriously wounded that it wanted to evacuate from Gaza for treatment in Egypt, along with thousands of foreign nationals looking to flee the enclave.

The list was then vetted by Egypt and the United States, which found that a third of the names on it were of Hamas fighters, the administration official said, adding that the list was rejected and none of the 76 wounded Palestinians who were ultimately evacuated in ambulances out of Gaza were members of the terror group.

Meanwhile, two senior Israeli officials told The Times of Israel that Israeli inspectors examining trucks of aid to Gaza earlier this week uncovered several oxygen concentrators meant to aerate the tunnels operated by terror organizations in Gaza.

“These weren’t for use in the hospitals, but below them. That’s why they were smuggled among boxes of cookies,” one of the senior Israeli officials said, adding that the entire truck in which the oxygen concentrators were found was barred from entering Gaza.

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The army on Friday also revealed that it had obtained a vast amount of intelligence information from a Hamas stronghold in Jabaliya captured by troops of the Givati Infantry Brigade on Tuesday.

The large military compound served Hamas’s elite Nukhba forces and the terror group’s Jabaliya area intelligence unit, according to the IDF. The military said around 50 Hamas terrorists were killed during the assault on the stronghold. Two Israeli soldiers were also killed amid the fighting.

The IDF said that it recovered Hamas battle plans, maps, command and control charts, communication devices, and the personal details of commanders and operatives of the terror group.

The materials were being researched by the 162nd Division’s intelligence unit and other officials, and will “be used by the IDF in the future fighting,” the military said.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said Friday that more than 9,200 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked war with its murderous assault. Hamas figures cannot be independently confirmed, and the terror group has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll. The figures do not differentiate between terrorists and civilians nor between those killed in Israeli strikes and those killed by the hundreds of terror group rockets that have fallen short inside the Strip.

Israel declared war, with the aim of eradicating Hamas, following the terror group’s devastating October 7 onslaught, in which some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, were brutally murdered in their homes and at a music festival, and over 240 more were abducted, including some 30 babies and children.

Twenty-nine days after Hamas terrorists carried out the rampage, plunging the region into war, Palestinian terror groups continued to fire rockets at communities in southern Israel on Saturday

A rocket launched Friday evening landed in the courtyard of a daycare center in Sderot, causing slight damage to the building, which was closed at the time. Sderot largely emptied out after the October 7 onslaught.

And four rockets were intercepted over Tel Aviv and central Israel by the Iron Dome missile defense system, authorities said. There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage.

There was also rocket fire from Lebanon on Saturday, amid repeated rocket and missile attacks by Hezbollah and allied Palestinian terror factions from southern Lebanon on northern Israel.

“political negotiations.”

“We are ready for political negotiations for a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine,” Haniyeh said during his address, adding a caveat that the process can only begin on condition of a ceasefire and the opening of humanitarian corridors to bring more aid into Gaza.

Ismail Haniyeh’s ostensible willingness to engage in dialogue with Israel seemed wholly at odds with the statement of another member of the Hamas politburo, Ghazi Hamad, who [declared](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/) last week that the terror group intends to perpetrate further massacres akin to the October 7 if only given the chance, until Israel is destroyed

Haniyeh’s call for a ceasefire is a nonstarter for Israel and its [allies,](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/white-house-says-ceasefire-in-gaza-is-not-the-right-answer-right-now/) who have vowed to destroy the terror group.

On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu categorically [dismissed the idea](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-shoots-down-calls-for-ceasefire-says-that-would-be-surrender-to-hamas/), saying that those calling for ceasefire are in effect calling for Israel to surrender to terrorism and barbarism.

“Just as the United States would not agree to a ceasefire after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or after the terrorist attack of 9/11, Israel will not agree to a cessation of hostilities with Hamas,” he said during a press conference for foreign media.The UN General Assembly passed a [nonbinding resolution](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-resolution-urging-immediate-gaza-ceasefire-passes-with-overwhelming-majority/) on Friday demanding an immediate halt to hostilities in Gaza, which made no mention of Hamas. The passage of the resolution was [hailed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-hails-un-resolution-calling-for-ceasefire-demands-its-immediate-implementation/) by the terror group.

As for Haniyeh’s request to open a humanitarian corridor into Gaza, Israel has allowed over 170 trucks carrying food and medicine to enter the blockaded Strip over the past two weeks.

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Jerusalem has, however, not allowed the transfer of fuel, claiming that the terror group will use it to operate its weapons system and to ensure its members can continue to hide in a vast network of underground tunnels and bunkers, which need electricity and ventilation.

The IDF revealed on October 24 that Hamas possesses [its own vast fuel reserves](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-gaza-photos-show-half-million-liters-of-fuel-held-by-hamas/), a claim that was [confirmed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/arab-western-officials-agree-hamas-keeping-gaza-food-fuel-for-itself-ny-times/) by Western and Arab officials to the New York Times last week. The terror group has also allegedly been stockpiling food and oil, keeping it from Gazan residents who are in desperate need. A senior Lebanese official told the newspaper that Hamas has enough supplies to sustain fighting for three to four months without a need for resupply.

Reports have emerged that the terror group has also [stolen humanitarian aid](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-refugee-agency-says-hamas-stole-fuel-and-medications-from-its-gaza-premises/) delivered to the UNRWA, the UN agency that provides for Palestinian refugees in Gaza and their descendants, as well as fuel.

In his statement, Hamas leader Haniyeh also praised the support provided to the terror group by movements in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, with reference to attacks against Israel over the past three weeks by Iran-backed groups in the region, namely the [Houthis](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/yemens-houthi-rebels-claim-to-launch-major-drone-attack-on-israel/) in Yemen, [Hezbollah](https://www.timesofisrael.com/on-lebanons-border-idf-reservists-prepare-for-potential-fight-against-hezbollah/) in Lebanon and various paramilitary factions in [Syria](https://www.memri.org/reports/signs-iran-will-open-front-against-israel-syrian-golan-heights).

The war was sparked on October 7, when some 3,000 terrorists led by Hamas burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

The vast majority of those killed as terrorists seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists.

According to the Hamas-run health ministry, more than 9,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which could not be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

Fifteen soldiers were killed in fighting deep inside the Gaza Strip in the course of Tuesday, Israeli authorities announced Wednesday, and another was killed by mortar fire on the border on Wednesday, the IDF said, as leaders warned of the “heavy toll” being paid by troops to eliminate the Hamas terror group.

Israeli forces continued to attack targets overnight and through Wednesday from the ground and air, killing dozens of members of the terror group, the Israel Defense Forces said.

Activity appeared to be focused in Jabaliya, a Hamas stronghold on the outskirts of Gaza City pounded by airstrikes overnight and again during the day Wednesday.

Eleven soldiers from the Givati Infantry Brigade’s Tzabar Battalion were killed when a Namer armored personnel carrier they were in was hit by an anti-tank guided missile fired by Hamas, the IDF said.

Another four soldiers were wounded in the same incident, including one seriously.

The 11 were named as Sgt. Adi Danan, 20, from Yavne; Staff Sgt. Halel Solomon, 20, from Dimona; Staff Sgt. Erez Mishlovsky, 20, from Oranit; Staff Sgt. Adi Leon, 20, from Nili; Cpl. Ido Ovadia, 19, from Tel Aviv; Cpl. Lior Siminovich, 19, from Herzliya; Staff Sgt. Roei Dawi, 20, from Jerusalem; Lt. Pedayah Mark, 22, from Otniel; Staff Sgt. Roei Saragosti, 20, from Ramat Hanegev Regional Council; Staff Sgt. Itay Yehuda, 20, from Rishon Lezion; and Staff Sgt. Shay Arvas, 20, from Holon

Two more soldiers from the 77th Battalion of the 7th Armored Brigade — Lt. Ariel Reich, 24, from Jerusalem and Cpl. Asif Luger, 21, from Yagur — were killed when their tank drove over an explosive device. Another two troops were seriously hurt in the same incident.

Also Tuesday, a soldier from Givati’s Rotem Battalion was seriously wounded in separate clashes with terrorists in the Gaza Strip, the IDF said. On Wednesday, two soldiers of the Paratrooper’s 101st Battalion were also seriously wounded during battles with Hamas.

Mark was the son of Rabbi Michael Mark, who was killed [in a 2016 West Bank shooting attack](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-israelis-badly-hurt-in-shooting-attack-near-hebron/). He was moderately hurt in that attack

On Tuesday night, the IDF announced that Staff Sgt. Roei Wolf, 20, from Ramat Gan, and Staff Sgt. Lavi Lipshitz, 20, from Modiin, who both served in the Givati Infantry Brigade’s reconnaissance unit, had been killed. The army said early Wednesday that the two died when a building they were in was hit by an RPG.

The soldier killed by mortar fire on Wednesday was named as Sgt. First Class (res.) Shalev Zion Sharabi, 22, a combat medic in the 749th Battalion of the Bislamach Brigade, from Teneh Omarim. He was hit near the southern community of Be’eri.

The casualty toll underlined the threats soldiers are facing as the army shifts to fraught urban combat in Gaza’s crowded streets after weeks of a punishing air campaign. The urban combat zone is thought to be awash in bombs and booby traps and undercut by a vast network of tunnels used by terrorists to ambush or surprise troops.

“The loss of IDF soldiers in battles with Hamas terrorists in Gaza is a severe and painful blow,” Defense Minister Yoav Gallant posted on X, formerly Twitter, on Wednesday morning, sending his condolences to the families of the fallen.

“Our significant achievements in the powerful fighting deep in the Strip are taking, to our sorrow, a heavy toll,” he said. But he vowed that Israel was ready for a long and complex operation.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to continue Israel’s war on Hamas despite the deaths.

“We have so many important achievements, but also painful losses. We know that every soldier of ours is an entire world,” Netanyahu said.

Israeli air power continued to provide cover for troops and tanks battling inside the enclave. Overnight Tuesday, ground forces directed the Air Force to strike a building in Jabaliya where a number of Hamas operatives were gathered, the IDF said. The army said ground forces also spotted a car with an anti-tank guided missile driving toward them in northern Gaza, and directed an aircraft to strike it.

Forces, including ground troops, struck dozens of Hamas targets overnight, the army said.

The Air Force also carried out strikes against Hamas command centers and other terror cells, it said.

Since the beginning of the war, some 11,000 sites belonging to Hamas and other terror groups have been hit, the IDF said Wednesday.

Later Wednesday, the IDF published several videos it said highlighted the close coordination between land, sea and air forces in the battle.

It said that intelligence gathered on the ground was being immediately transferred to the air and naval forces to carry out combined attacks.

The army said that the combined attacks had helped “destroy dozens of Hamas terror targets including observation towers, anti-tank missile cells, ships and military posts. In addition, terrorists have been killed, and infiltrations into Israel and terror attacks thwarted.”

Footage showed troops moving door to door through ruined, rubble-strewn neighborhoods, tanks firing at what appeared to be open fields, and bombs being dropped on an unidentified object behind other bombed-out buildings.

Al-Jazeera television, one of the few media outlets still reporting from northern Gaza, aired footage of devastation in Jabaliya and of several wounded people, including children, being brought to a nearby hospital. The Hamas-run government said the strikes killed and wounded many people, but the exact toll was not yet known.

The Al-Jazeera footage showed nearly identical scenes as the day before, with dozens of men digging through the gray rubble of demolished multistory buildings in search of survivors.

According to the Hamas-run health ministry, more than 8,700 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which could not be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and it also does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. The terror group has pushed back against such claims, releasing an unverified list of names it says represent those killed. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

As the fighting raged, Palestinians in Gaza appeared to be plunged back into a communications blackout Wednesday morning, days after service was restored following US pressure.

Palestinian telecom providers Paltel and Jawwal told The Associated Press early Wednesday that there was a communication blackout.

Internet-access advocacy group NetBlocks.org confirmed that Gaza “is in the midst of a total or near-total telecoms blackout.”

It said the disruption was consistent with an earlier blackout imposed from late Friday to early Sunday, which coincided with the entry of large numbers of ground troops into Gaza in what Israel at the time described as a new stage in the war.

US media reported that the original blackout only ended after the White House pressured Israel to restore the networks.

Israel has not commented on either blackout.

Wednesday’s blackout, which eased after several hours, ensured that details of the ongoing fighting beyond IDF releases were sparse, with entry in and out of Strip essentially severed. At the same time, Egypt and Hamas opened the Rafah crossing for the first time since the war erupted, allowing out hundreds of foreign passport holder and dozens of severely wounded Gazans.

The war was sparked on October 7, when some 2,500 terrorists led by Hamas burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing at least 245 hostages of all ages under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

The vast majority of those killed as terrorists seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists

After weeks of punishing airstrikes, Israel has shifted in recent days to a ground offensive. On Tuesday evening, IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari described the fighting as “complex close-quarters combat.”

Hagari said troops were fighting terrorists heroically and courageously. “This is a dangerous conflict. It has a price,” he said. “It is complex, but it is essential to our capacity to achieve the aims of the war.

Israel has been vague about its operations in Gaza, but residents and spokesmen for terror groups say troops appear to be trying to take control of the two main north-south roads, The Associated Press reported.

In recent days, Israeli troops have advanced toward the outskirts of Gaza City from the north and east. Israeli officials say Hamas’s military infrastructure, including hundreds of kilometers (miles) of tunnels, is concentrated in the city, which was home to some 650,000 people before the war.

On Tuesday, massive blasts leveled parts of the Jabaliya residential area on the outskirts of Gaza City, in what the IDF later confirmed was a targeted attack on a Hamas commander and infrastructure belonging to the terror group’s Central Jabaliya Battalion. The IDF said shortly afterward that it had killed the commander of Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion, Ibrahim Biari, in an airstrike that was part of “a wide-scale strike” on Hamas operatives and infrastructure belonging to the Central Jabaliya Battalion.

The military said the strikes that killed Biari and several other terrorists caused underground terror tunnels to collapse, bringing down several nearby buildings.

According to the IDF, Biari was one of the Hamas commanders responsible for directing members of the terror group’s elite Nukhba forces to invade Israel on October 7

Hamas claimed multiple Israeli airstrikes had leveled several apartment blocks and the Hamas-run health ministry said 50 people were killed, a claim which could not be independently verified. It initially claimed a death toll of 400.

According to the IDF, the Central Jabaliya Battalion had taken control of several civilian buildings in the area, and many of those killed in the strikes were Hamas operatives.

Nevertheless, the strikes drew sharp rebukes from Arab nations.

Saudi Arabia on Wednesday denounced the strike “in the strongest terms possible,” decrying the “inhumane targeting” of the site “by the Israeli occupation forces.”

Egypt and Jordan issued similarly strong condemnations, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Israel was “completely out of its mind,” accusing it of crimes against humanity.

The IDF has repeatedly called on civilians to move south for their safety.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned because Israel is also carrying out airstrikes in the south.

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties and urging the civilian population to evacuate to southern Gaza.

With all the attendant terrible dangers, the war against Hamas is finally being fought deep in enemy territory.

Following three weeks of airstrikes targeting Hamas after its horrific slaughter of 1,400 people across southwest Israel on October 7, the IDF has gradually stepped up its ground offensive, with the declared goal of destroying Hamas’s military and governance capabilities.

The task is extraordinarily complex. Hamas, an Islamic death cult terrorist-army, was allowed for years to indoctrinate, train and arm tens of thousands of savage murderers. It has built a vast underground operations network, much of which has proved impervious to the IAF strikes and from where its gunmen are now seeking to repel the widening IDF incursion. After the unbearable losses of October 7, and amid the ongoing wrenching nightmare of 240 hostages, from babies and toddlers to the elderly and infirm, Israel is now adding to the terrible toll soldiers killed in the Gaza death trap.

The offensive is immensely hamstrung by Hamas’s predictably cynical use of Gazans as human shields. How much support Hamas maintains among ordinary Gazans is broadly unknowable, but plainly many noncombatants are being prevented by the terror-government from leaving the northern Gaza combat areas. Thus the IDF, which has pleaded daily for noncombatants to evacuate, cannot be certain whether it is encountering terrorists or civilians as it pushes deeper into the urban warzone

As the political and military leadership has [stressed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hanegbi-says-gazans-should-avoid-hospitals-in-north-urges-egypt-to-accept-injured/) repeatedly, this will be a long, hard and painful war. But for all the public’s raw pain and lost faith in both those political and military establishments, and all the abiding divisions within Israel over how we reached this darkest hour in our modern history, the IDF has near-universal national support, its troops are highly motivated and dedicated, and its commanders and the emergency war coalition are resolute that the mission must be completed — that it must not end until Hamas is defanged.**By our side**

Domestically riven, with an unprecedentedly hardline government seeking to neuter the judiciary, Israel was plunged into this conflict from a parlous position.

Internationally, too, the anti-Arab, pro-annexation, Jewish supremacist outlook of key ministers, setting the tone for the coalition, was hardly conducive to maximal support when Israel has most needed it.

Nonetheless, some allies have proven steadfast — and most importantly the US, with its Zionist president ready to overlook the open derision that members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition had been expressing for him and his administration.

Conscious, too, that this Israel-Hamas war is already a multi-front conflict and that it has the potential to explode into full-scale war in the region and beyond, US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken are basically holding Israel’s hand in the fight — deploying ever-more military resources to the region, shuttling and phoning, even participating in the deliberations of Israel’s war cabinet.

“You may be strong enough on your own to defend yourself,” Blinken [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/blinken-in-tel-aviv-as-long-as-us-exists-israel-wont-have-to-defend-itself-alone/) in Tel Aviv in the early days of the war, “but as long as America exists, you will never, ever have to. We will always be there by your side.”

Manifestly, it is a supreme Israeli interest to retain that military and diplomatic American partnership. It is ultimately the US, and the US alone, that can resist international pressure to halt the offensive against Hamas, and the US, alone, that can deter, and if necessary engage, should Iran elect to widen the war.

A little belatedly, Netanyahu seems to have realized that US calls to boost humanitarian aid for Gaza noncombatants are worth heeding: In what he has defined as a war between the civilized world and barbarians, the forces of civilization need to act and be seen to be acting humanely.

### Pro-Hamas agitators, Diaspora fears

This war has, of course, already spread far beyond the region in terms of public opinion and action, with immense implications for Diaspora Jews — [many of whom](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-hamas-sentiment-shocks-european-jews-rekindling-fears-about-their-future/) feel themselves in [increased peril](https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-attacks-uk-jewish-leaders-share-worries-about-israel-as-a-safe-haven-for-jews/) — and indeed for would-be enlightened countries with emboldened anti-Israel and pro-Hamas agitatorsFourteen hundred slaughtered in Israel is “so last month” for a mounting swath of the watching world — some motivated by ancient hatreds, some just too weak-willed to employ a modicum of intellectual rigor and honesty.

Endless ongoing rocket fire, launched indiscriminately across Israel, sending much of the population rushing for safety multiple times each day, making schooling near-impossible and tanking the economy, is deemed marginal

The fact that Hamas operates from beneath and around Gaza’s hospitals and mosques and churches and schools is forgettable. That it uses Gaza’s civilians as cover and protection is old news.

But its false claims that Israel deliberately targets those civilians, and its immediate efforts to blame Israel for incidents with civilian casualties, are instantly treated as credible

Israel has never managed effective public diplomacy. And this abidingly dysfunctional government is entirely incapable of doing so.

Just as ordinary Israelis have organized to help the hundreds of thousands of displaced Israelis, from south and north, with almost every aspect of their displaced lives, helped campaign for the hostages, tried to salvage Israeli agriculture and much more, so, too, it is ordinary Israelis who are fighting the public diplomacy battle, doing what they can on social media while utterly outnumbered and under-resourced.

Even in the most straightforward areas of public diplomacy, such as the visits of supportive world leaders, the government is failing to utilize opportunity. As the former IDF operations chief and ex-national security council head Giora Eiland has stressed repeatedly these past weeks, solidarity visits and expressions of support from world leaders are insufficient.

Those leaders should be asked to issue demands on behalf of the Israel they are supporting — to demand that the Red Cross be given access to the hostages, to demand that Shifa Hospital be evacuated, to endorse Israel’s call for northern Gaza’s noncombatants to head south and be allowed to head south, to demand a halt to the indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza.

The way things stand, Eiland lamented in an Army Radio interview on Wednesday morning, most of the international community is not remotely invested in Israel’s survival and its citizens’ well-being: “Jews are killed and the world [merely] mourns.”

As he said in another interview, last week, “Jews have the right to *live*, too.

Thirty-four journalists have been killed in the war between Israel and the Hamas terror group, an international media freedom group said Wednesday, accusing both sides of committing possible war crimes.

Reporters Without Borders called on International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutors to investigate the deaths. The organization said it had already filed a complaint regarding eight Palestinian journalists it claimed were killed in Israel’s bombardment of the Gaza Strip, and an Israeli journalist murdered during Hamas’s October 7 onslaught in southern Israel.

However, more than one Israeli journalist was killed in the Hamas assault. [Ynet photographer Roee Idan](https://www.timesofisrael.com/roee-idan-43-photographer-captured-first-moments-of-hamas-assault/) was murdered in his hometown of Kfar Aza, [Israel Hayom photographer Yaniv Zohar](https://www.timesofisrael.com/yaniv-zohar-54-news-photographer-and-family-murdered-son-escaped/) was murdered in Nahal Oz along with his wife and two daughters, and [Kan news editor Ayelet Arnin](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ayelet-arnin-22-kan-news-editor-killed-at-music-festival/) and [Maariv reporter Shai Regev](https://www.timesofisrael.com/shai-regev-25-gossip-reporters-final-story-was-about-bruno-mars/) were murdered at the Nova music festival near Re’im.

The scale, seriousness and recurring nature of international crimes targeting journalists, particularly in Gaza, calls for a priority investigation by the ICC prosecutor,” Christophe Deloire, director-general of the group also known by the French abbreviation RSF, said. The organization is headquartered in France.

It’s the third such complaint to be filed by the group since 2018 alleging war crimes against Palestinian journalists in Gaza.

Israel says it makes every effort to avoid killing civilians and accuses Hamas of putting them at risk by operating in residential areas, refusing repeated calls to allow civilians to evacuate to designated safe zones, and launching thousands of rockets at Israel, hundreds of which are believed to have misfired and landed in Gaza during the current war.

The organization said its latest complaint also cites “the deliberate, total or partial, destruction of the premises of more than 50 media outlets in Gaza” since Israel declared war with the aim of rooting out the Hamas terror group, which openly seeks Israel’s destruction and has ruled the Strip since taking over in a bloody 2007 coup.

Another media freedom organization, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), said Wednesday that it was investigating reports of journalists “killed, injured, detained or missing” in the war, including in Lebanon. It said its preliminary death toll was at least 31 journalists and media workers.

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“CPJ emphasizes that journalists are civilians doing important work during times of crisis and must not be targeted by warring parties,” said Sherif Mansour, the New York-based nonprofit’s Middle East and North Africa program coordinator.

The ICC’s prosecution office is already investigating the actions of Israeli and Palestinian authorities dating back to Operation Protective Edge against Hamas in 2014. The probe — which Israel views as illegitimate since it was set up in a way that avoids probing Hamas’s kidnapping and murdering of three Israeli teenagers, which sparked that war — can also consider allegations of crimes committed during the current war.

During a visit to the Rafah border crossing on Sunday, International Criminal Court Prosecutor Karim Khan called on Israel to respect international law but stopped short of accusing the country of war crimes. He called Hamas’s October 7 rampage — when some 2,500 terrorists invaded Israel and killed some 1,400 people, mostly civilians slaughtered in their homes or at a music festival — a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

Israel argues the ICC has no jurisdiction in the conflict because Palestine is not an independent sovereign state. Israel isn’t a party to the treaty that underpins the international court and is not one of its 123 member states.

Reporters Without Borders [said Sunday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/watchdog-group-accuses-israel-of-intentionally-killing-journalists-on-lebanon-border/) that strikes that hit a group of journalists in southern Lebanon earlier this month, killing one, were targeted rather than accidental and that the journalists had clearly been identified as members of the press.

The organization published preliminary conclusions from an ongoing investigation, based on video evidence and witness testimonies, into two strikes that killed Reuters videographer Issam Abdallah and wounded six journalists from Reuters, AFP and Al Jazeera as they were covering clashes on the southern Lebanese border on October 13.

Hamas is willing to extend its truce deal with Israel for four days and release more Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian security prisoners, a source close to the terror group reportedly said Wednesday, as mediators sought a lasting halt to the conflict.

The ongoing truce is scheduled to expire early Thursday after a six-day pause in the conflict, sparked by the deadly Hamas assault that prompted an Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip.

With 61 Israeli hostages and 20 foreign nationals already released and more set to walk free on Wednesday during the truce, Qatari mediators said they were working for a “sustainable” ceasefire.

Hamas on Wednesday “informed the mediators that it is willing to extend the truce for four days,” a source close to the terror group told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Under that arrangement, Hamas “would be able to release Israeli prisoners that it, other resistance movements and other parties hold during this period, according to the terms of the existing truce,”

Israel has agreed to extend the truce, which was originally set to expire on Monday, by 24 hours for every 10 hostages freed, and Hamas is expected to release a sixth group of hostages later Wednesday.Early Wednesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said it had received a list with the names of 10 abducted Israelis that Hamas is slated to release later in the day. It said the families of those on the list have been informed, without giving further details.

Meanwhile, Moussa Abu Marzouk, an official from the Hamas political wing, said the terror group will also release two additional hostages with Russian citizenship in a gesture of “appreciation” for the position taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

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Hamas was believed to be holding eight dual Israeli-Russian citizens. One, Roni Krivoi, was released Sunday.

Relatives of Israeli-Russian hostages being held captive by Hamas in Gaza went to Moscow this week to seek the Kremlin’s assistance in getting their family members released by the terror organization.

Twelve hostages, including 10 Israelis, were released Tuesday, bringing the total number of people freed during the truce to 81

The initial four-day truce started Friday and had been due to expire Monday, when it was extended by two days. The deal, reached last week, provided for the release of 50 Israeli women and children abducted by Hamas during its October 7 attacks, in which 1,200 people were killed, most of them civilians, and more than 240 were taken hostage.

Israel has vowed to resume its military campaign to end Hamas’s 16-year rule of Gaza, but is facing mounting [international pressure](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-idf-should-not-displace-gazans-en-masse-in-the-south-like-it-did-in-the-north/) to extend the truce and to spare south Gaza a devastating ground offensive like the one that has demolished much of the north.

Hamas’s expression of willingness to extend the truce comes a day after Mossad spy agency chief David Barnea was in Doha for talks with CIA Director William Burns, Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed Bin Abdul Rahman al-Thani and other Qatari officials, for expanded discussions on the hostages held by Hamas and other terror factions in Gaza since the October 7 onslaught.

A Qatari source told AFP that the discussions aim “to build on the progress of the extended humanitarian pause agreement and to initiate further discussions about the next phase of a potential deal.”

Burns’s focus was expected to include freeing Americans among the hostages and keeping the releases going overall, which could lead to more male hostages and the first known Israeli security forces members being released, a US official told AP.

The Ynet news site said further that talks could focus on five groups of hostages: female soldiers, men no longer of the age to do reserve duty, IDF reservists, male soldiers, and the bodies of those killed during the October assault and later in captivity.

Meanwhile, Barnea relayed that Israel will not agree to talks on a new hostage deal before the current agreement is fully implemented, and all women and children hostages are released, an Israeli official told Axios on Tuesday.

“It might be possible to reach separate agreements around other groups of hostages but Israel made clear it can only happen after the current deal is fully implemented and all women and children are released,” the official reportedly said.

The original deal stipulated that the truce could be extended by more days — up to a total of 10 days, including the first four — if Hamas releases at least 10 additional hostages each day, with Israel freeing more Palestinian inmates at a ratio of three prisoners for every hostage.

Given the provisions set out in the deal, the truce could potentially extend to Sunday, assuming more Israeli hostages are set free.

Israel would like to see all the remaining women and children held hostage in Gaza released over the coming days. It believes Hamas is still holding 30 to 40 women and children: about 20 women aged 21 to 50, and at least nine children, the youngest of whom is 10-month-old Kfir Bibas, who was taken with his parents and four-year-old brother from Kibbutz Nir Oz on October 7. The Israel Defense Forces said Monday that Hamas transferred the family to another Palestinian terror group in Gaza.

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“We expect to have another two to three days of hostage release and a humanitarian pause, after which either we resume operations in Gaza or potentially reach a follow-on agreement,” an Israeli official told the Washington Post.

The official also predicted most of the abducted children would be freed by Wednesday night, saying Israel was open to weighing Hamas offers for releasing Israeli male hostages and soldiers once all kids and women are returned.

The official stressed, however, that further releases would not “lead to a permanent ceasefire.”

Quoting a senior diplomatic source, Ynet reported that negotiations on extending the temporary truce in Gaza have not included consideration of proposals for extending the pause beyond 10 days, but indicated Israel could be open to the idea.

“If there is a concrete proposal, the cabinet will consider it, but there hasn’t been anything like that. If we see it’s a serious proposal, we’ll look into it,”

The source stressed that Israel remains committed to toppling Hamas, a key aim of its military operation in Gaza.

“If we can get as many hostages out as possible in 10 days, that’s great,” the source said. “Nobody is forgetting the war’s goal and nobody will agree to something ridiculous like disarmament. We already know how much international forces can be relied on.” Channel 12 reported that Israel is expected to be presented with a proposal for all hostages to be freed in exchange for all Palestinian security prisoners, including those convicted of murder and those captured on October 7, and an end to the war, an offer that Jerusalem will reject.

“Our eye remains on the ball,” the network quoted an Israeli source as saying. “Bringing back the hostages and destroying Hamas military and governing capabilities are two complementary goals — one does not replace the other.”

Netanyahu, his war cabinet colleagues and Israel’s security chiefs have all stressed that the twin declared goals of the war — to destroy Hamas and get back all the hostages — will be both be pursued until they are achieved.

The UN Security Council approved a resolution Wednesday calling for “urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout the Gaza Strip” after four failed attempts to respond to the Israel-Hamas war.

The vote was 12-0 with the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia abstaining.

The final draft watered down language from a “demand” to a “call” for humanitarian pauses. It also watered down a demand for “the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups.”

The resolution makes no mention of a ceasefire. It also doesn’t refer to Hamas’s devastating October 7 onslaught on Israel, in which terrorists rampaged through southern communities, killing over 1,200 people, mostly civilians butchered in their homes and at a music festival, and kidnapping some 240 people. Israel then declared war with the aim of toppling the terror group’s regime in Gaza, which it has ruled since 2007.

The Hamas-run Gaza health ministry said Tuesday that 11,500 people had been killed in Gaza since the start of the war, in figures that cannot be independently verified, do not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives, and also include those killed in hundreds of failed Palestinian rocket launches.

Russia proposed an amendment to the resolution before the vote that would have called for durable humanitarian pauses leading to a ceasefire. But it was rejected by a vote of 5-1 with nine abstentions because it failed to get the minimum nine “yes” votesBut the resolution, sponsored by Malta, did bring the 15 members of the UN’s most powerful body together in a first response to the ongoing war that is having catastrophic humanitarian consequences in Gaza.

The resolution asks that “all parties comply with their obligations under international law, notably with regard to the protection of civilians, especially children.”

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Responding to the vote, Israel’s ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan said the resolution “will have no meaning in practice” as Israel “is acting according to international law, while the Hamas terrorists will not read the resolution at all and will not act on it.”

“It is unfortunate that the council continues to ignore and not condemn or even mention the massacre committed by Hamas that led to the war in Gaza. It’s shameful. Israel will continue to act until Hamas is destroyed and the hostages are returned,” Erdan said in a statement.

Israel’s Foreign Ministry also demanded that the Security Council work to free the hostages held in the Strip as well as “condemn Hamas unequivocally and address the need to create a different security reality in Gaza.”

In a statement, the Foreign Ministry said there was “no room for extended humanitarian pauses as long as 239 hostages are still in the hands of Hamas terrorists.”

Several [reports](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-to-weigh-deal-that-would-see-50-hostages-freed-3-day-ceasefire/) Wednesday indicated that there is a potential deal in the works to free a number of captives in exchange for a several-day pause in fighting.

Malta’s UN envoy Vanessa Frazier said before the vote that “the Security Council members are united in wanting a voice.”

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While recognizing the “nuances” between their positions, she said all 15 members have “the desire to save life and provide respite” to civilians.

UN Security Council resolutions are legally binding, but in practice, many parties choose to ignore the council’s requests for action.

Richard Gowan, UN director for the International Crisis Group, said the Security Council has called for ceasefires in wars from the Balkans to Syria “with little or no impact.”

The Security Council, which has the responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, has been paralyzed since the war began by its internal divisions. This is especially the case between China and Russia, which want an immediate ceasefire, and the United States, which has called for humanitarian pauses but [objects](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-vetoes-gaza-war-un-resolution-that-doesnt-stress-israeli-right-to-self-defense/) to any mention of a ceasefire, which its close ally Israel strongly opposes.

“I know we are all disappointed about the inaction of the Council in the past 40 days,” China’s UN ambassador Jun Zhang said earlier Wednesday.

The resolution calls for humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout the Gaza Strip for a “sufficient number of days” for unhindered access by the UN, Red Cross, and other aid groups to get water, electricity, fuel, food, and medical supplies to all those in need. It says the pauses also should allow for the repair of essential infrastructure and enable urgent rescue and recovery efforts.

In the four previous tries for Security Council approval, a Brazil-drafted resolution was vetoed by the United States, a US-drafted resolution was vetoed by Russia and China and two Russian-drafted resolutions failed to get the minimum “yes” votes.

After the fourth failure, frustrated Arab nations turned to the 193-member General Assembly and succeeded in getting wide approval for a resolution calling for a “humanitarian truce” in Gaza meant to lead to a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

It was the first United Nations response to the war. But unlike Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they are a barometer of world opinion.

The vote was 120-14 with 45 abstentions. Of the five veto-holding Security Council members, Russia, China, and France voted in favor, the United States voted against and Britain abstained.

The General Assembly resolution was adopted on October 27, and Israel agreed on November 9 to four-hour pauses. But only limited aid has been delivered to Gaza through the Rafah crossing from Egypt, and a humanitarian crisis has been brewing.

The Crisis Group’s Gowan said US opposition to a ceasefire “is a gift that keeps on giving for Russia diplomatically.” He said that while many diplomats think Russia is demanding a cease-fire “for largely cynical reasons to make the Americans look bad,” Moscow’s position “is closer to the mainstream of council thinking, and the US looks isolated.”

“A UN cease-fire call would embarrass but not really constrain the Israelis,” he told the AP. “But the US clearly feels that even such a symbolic move is too much of a political risk.

WASHINGTON — US Secretary of State Antony Blinken aims to build support for humanitarian pauses in the fighting in Gaza during his second trip to the Middle East since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, US officials told The Times of Israel on Thursday as the Biden administration’s top diplomat departed for the region with a difficult task ahead.

Blinken will need to convince both Israel and Washington’s Arab allies, whose foreign ministers he is planning to meet at a summit the State Department is organizing in the Jordanian capital Amman on Saturday, a senior Arab diplomat and a US official said on condition of anonymity.

The Biden administration is pitching “temporary and localized” humanitarian pauses to increase the flow of aid in the Strip and to more safely evacuate civilians out of harm’s way, a second US official said, adding that they could also give Hamas an opportunity to get a better account of the roughly 240 hostages it kidnapped into Gaza during its October 7 onslaught, in which the terrorists massacred 1,400 people in Israel, most of them civilians slaughtered amid brutal atrocities.

The hostages are believed to be scattered in tunnels throughout the Hamas-run enclave, with some of them held by Palestinian Islamic Jihad and possibly other terrorists, and Hamas has at times claimed not to know where they all are. If Hamas doesn’t have a clear idea of where all the hostages are amid the chaos caused by the fighting, it’s harder for it to hold negotiations over their release, the official said.

In the meantime, Reuters reported that the US is flying surveillance drones over the Gaza Strip to help gather intelligence on the locations of the hostages, which are believed to include roughly 10 Americans.

The humanitarian pauses do allow for Hamas to regroup militarily, which the Biden administration does not want. But as it tries to keep the humanitarian situation in the Strip from collapsing entirely, dragging much of its regional agenda down with it, the US official speaking to The Times of Israel said the approach was necessary for Washington to pursue.

Blinken will need to do a lot of convincing, though, as Israel has yet to embrace the idea of humanitarian pauses, convinced that Hamas will only buckle if squeezed sufficiently by the IDF’s intensifying ground invasion, which has been backed by plenty of firepower from the air. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office issued a swift denial Thursday of a New York Times report claiming he was prepared to consider humanitarian pauses

### Pressure to cease bombing areas where Gazans told to flee

But even before it tries to coax Israel to temporarily halt its counter-offensive in Gaza, declaredly aimed at eliminating Hamas’s military and governance capabilities, the Biden administration has been privately pressing Israel to limit its airstrikes in the enclave’s south, arguing that the IDF has less legitimacy to be targeting that area of the Strip after telling civilians to evacuate there from the north, a US and an Israeli official told The Times of Israel.

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The Israeli official said the IDF strikes have focused mostly on northern Gaza where a larger proportion of Hamas strongholds are located. However, it reserves the right to target the terror group anywhere in the Strip after the October 7 massacres inside Israel, the official clarified.

The Israeli official highlighted the IDF’s demarcation of a humanitarian zone in southwest Gaza where international aid is being provided to those who have fled following the military’s directive for Palestinians to evacuate the northern part of the Strip.

But the US official retorted that this zone has not been clearly designated by Israel and is far too small to house Gaza’s entire population of 2.3 million people, leaving the vast majority of them still exposed to the IDF’s massive aerial bombardment.

The US official clarified that Washington recognizes that Hamas is operating from within and underneath civilian populations throughout the entirety of Gaza. However, the US is concerned about the ballooning number of civilian casualties, which complicates the administration’s ability to continue supporting Israel’s military operation while also rallying allies to follow suit,

### Uphill battle to move Arab world from ceasefire to pause

Meanwhile, Washington’s Arab partners will need to be pushed from the other direction in order to back humanitarian pauses, given that they are overwhelmingly demanding a more immediate and sustained ceasefire.

Arguably the most ardent backer of the ceasefire is Jordan, which submitted a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly last week that called for an end to the fighting in Gaza. Blinken will arrive in Jordan on Friday evening after spending the day in Israel.

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While in Amman, Blinken will participate in a ministerial summit with a group of Arab counterparts on Saturday, which he will use to rally regional partners behind as many of the Biden administration’s policies regarding the Israel-Hamas war as possible, the US official said.

The official pointed to Washington’s calls for humanitarian pauses, increasing humanitarian aid, rejecting the permanent displacement of Palestinians and opposing a permanent Israeli occupation in Gaza as some of the stances that Arab allies could support, while adding that the Biden administration is aiming to reach agreements with participating countries regarding these issues before the summit, so that it doesn’t end without a diplomatic achievement.

The invite list for the summit has not yet been finalized, the US official clarified, while a State Department spokesperson declined to comment on the matter.

In the US as well, calls for a ceasefire are slowly spreading from a vocal far-left flank of the Democratic party.

Dick Durbin became the first US senator to express support for a ceasefire on Thursday while clarifying that it must include the release of all hostages in the Hamas-run enclave.

Durbin’s condition set him apart from the 18 Democrats from the far-left flank of his party who signed onto a resolution calling for a ceasefire, which made no mention of those kidnapped into Gaza. The Biden administration has thus far rejected the ceasefire approach, saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas, leaving it functioning and capable of terrorizing Israelis in the future.

Even within the administration, there’s been growing discomfort with US President Joe Biden’s continued support of Israel’s military campaign, as the images of destruction from Gaza continue to pile up, two sources familiar with the matter said. However, they clarified that the dissent has largely been limited to mid-to-low-level State Department officials who work on humanitarian and conflict resolution issues and who aren’t responsible for setting policy.

US Vice President Kamala Harris swatted away at calls to rein Israel in, telling reporters in London on Thursday, “We are not going to create any conditions on the support that we are giving Israel to defend itself.”

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She also said, “We are not telling Israel how it should conduct this war,” but The Times of Israel’s aforementioned reporting has shown a more nuanced US approach in private.

### Day-after strategizing

Before departing for Tel Aviv on Thursday, Blinken told reporters that civilians have been “bear[ing] the brunt” of Israel’s military campaign targeting Hamas in Gaza and that in Israel he will be discussing “concrete steps” the IDF can take in order to protect civilians — some of the most forceful comments he has made yet, as the death count in Gaza crossed 9,000, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry. Those numbers cannot be independently verified and do, however, include Palestinian terrorists as well as civilians killed by errant rockets fired by terror groups in Gaza.

Still, Blinken reiterated that Israel has a right and obligation to defend itself so that its people are not again massacred by Hamas.

The secretary also acknowledged that Hamas is “quite literally” the reason why civilians have been caught in the crossfire due to the terror group’s use of human shields and its placement of military infrastructure underneath or inside hospitals, schools and mosques.

Blinken said he has five main agenda items for his trip to the region: Strategizing with Israel about its military campaign; ensuring that the war doesn’t spread to additional fronts; continuing efforts to get more humanitarian aid into Gaza; helping evacuate all American citizens and foreign nationals who want to leave Gaza; securing the release of the hostages; and setting the conditions for an eventual two-state solution after the war is over.

In discussing Israel’s strategy for the war, Blinken will again press Jerusalem to start laying out its “day-after” scenario, a US official said.

Israel has thus far refused to publicly entertain the question of who will govern Gaza if it succeeds in its goal of toppling Hamas. Even privately, formal discussions have not escalated above the bureaucratic level of the various relevant ministries,

The vacuum has been filled by the US, which has jumped in to declare on Wednesday that it would like to see a “revitalized” Palestinian Authority return to ruling Gaza, with countries in the region and international agencies possibly playing an interim role until Ramallah is ready.

The proposal is part of the Biden administration’s desire to seize the opportunity created by the ongoing crisis to re-unify the West Bank and Gaza under the same governing body, thereby advancing a two-state vision.

Israel has given no indication that it would be interested in such a framework, particularly given its current hardline government, which continues to take steps to weaken Hamas’s more moderate PA rival. However, the right-wing coalition is viewed by many in Israel as having failed to protect the country on October 7, opening up the possibility that it will eventually be replaced by a more moderate group of parties.

The Israel Defense Forces on Thursday afternoon announced the death of a senior officer during fighting in Gaza, bringing the military’s death toll to 18 since Tuesday, and 333 since the beginning of the war.

The army said ground forces and tanks clashed with Hamas terror cells in the northern Gaza Strip overnight, killing dozens of operatives, in what The Times of Israel has learned was an intense and chaotic midnight battle that raged on for over three hours following an ambush targeting soldiers from Golani’s 13th Battalion.

taken part in “prolonged battles” against Hamas terrorists who had fired missiles, set off explosive devices, and hurled grenades at the forces.

The Hamas gunmen tried to ambush the Israeli force at midnight, emerging from tunnels and attacking them with anti-tank missiles, mortars, and drones. They tried to enter the armored personnel carriers and take control of them. More than 20 terrorists were believed to have been killed and several managed to escape, while there were no Israeli fatalities in that fight.

The military said the Golani troops fought back, assisted by artillery and tank shelling, and calling in an airstrike and missile strikes by the Navy.

“At the end of the fighting, dozens of terrorists were killed,”

The military said that troops of the Nahal Infantry Brigade also encountered a group of Hamas gunmen who opened fire at them, and directed an aircraft to strike and kill the terror cell.

Reservist forces, meanwhile, directed an aircraft to strike an anti-tank squad, with navy support, according to the IDF.

The IDF said it has continued to strike Hamas sites in the Gaza Strip, including weapons manufacturing and storage facilities, anti-tank missile launching positions, and drone launching positions.

Later Thursday, the IDF’s Military Intelligence Directorate said its so-called “targets center” had identified some 1,200 new Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip amid the ongoing ground offensive that began last week.

The Military Intelligence Directorate is using artificial intelligence and automated tools to “produce reliable targets quickly and accurately,”

The IDF said hundreds of soldiers were working to produce new targets “on a large scale.”A senior intelligence officer said that “in war, the enemy behaves differently and creates new opportunities.”

The senior officer said other new tools were being used for the first time to immediately provide ground forces in Gaza with updated information on targets to strike.

So far, the IDF said it has struck more than 12,000 targets in the Strip.

The operations haven’t come without losses to Israeli forces. The army has previously confirmed the deaths of 17 soldiers in or near the Strip since Tuesday morning, and on Thursday afternoon announced that Lt. Col. Salman Habaka, 33, the commander of the 188th Armored Brigade’s 53rd Battalion, from Yanuh-Jat, was killed battling Hamas terrorists in the northern part of Gaza.

Habaka is the most senior officer to have been killed during the IDF’s ground operation in the Gaza Strip. No further details were given on the circumstances of his death.

Separately, a reservist of the 679th Yiftah Brigade, a Givati soldier, and a Combat Engineering soldier, were seriously wounded in overnight operations in the northern part of Gaza.

Additionally, a soldier of the Border Defense Corps’ Caracal Battalion was seriously wounded in an incident on the Egyptian border. No further details were given on the circumstances.

Previously, 11 troops were killed when a Namer armored personnel carrier they were in was hit by an anti-tank missile. Two others died when an RPG was fired at a building they were in. Two were killed when their tank drove over an explosive device, another was killed by mortar fire on the border, and one died during clashes with Hamas gunmen.

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The casualties underlined the threats soldiers are facing as the army shifts to fraught urban combat in Gaza’s crowded streets after weeks of a punishing air campaign. The urban combat zone is thought to be awash with bombs and booby traps and undercut by a vast network of tunnels used by terrorists to ambush or surprise troops.

Some of the fatalities came during a major IDF assault Tuesday on Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion compound, located in the Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza. Israel is battling to destroy Hamas and end its rule over the Strip after the group’s devastating terror attack earlier this month that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, mostly civilians.

According to a report Thursday by the Ynet news site, [Hamas sent a group of 100 women and children](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-accuses-hamas-of-using-over-100-women-and-children-as-human-shields-in-gaza/) to act as human shields to protect the compound.

“We are prepared for more incidents of such cynical and blatant use of the population,” said an unnamed IDF officer who apparently witnessed the incident.

The report did not say how troops dealt with the situation, but the compound was captured by the IDF.

Meanwhile, rocket fire by Palestinian terrorists appeared to taper off slightly, as terror groups presumably prepare for a long battle.

Among the targets on Thursday were Ashdod and largely evacuated Gaza border towns. There were no reports of direct impacts or injuries.

Also on Thursday, IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said the military had notified the families of 242 hostages that their loved ones were being held in the Gaza Strip, up by two from the previous tally.

He said the number was not final as the military investigates new information.

The number does not include four released hostages — mother and daughter Judith and Natalie Ra’anan, and elderly women Yocheved Lifshitz and Nurit Cooper — or Pvt. Ori Megidish, who was rescued by the IDF on Sunday night, meaning at least 247 people were taken hostage on October 7.

There are still dozens more missing people whose fates are currently unknown. Out of the confirmed captives, it isn’t clear how many are alive. Hamas is also believed to be holding two Israeli civilians who entered the Strip in 2015, as well as the bodies of two IDF soldiers killed in 2014.

Israel declared war, with the aim of eradicating Hamas, following the terror group’s devastating October 7 onslaught, in which civilians were brutally murdered or abducted from their homes and from the site of a music festival. A top Hamas official has said that given the chance, the Palestinian terror group [would repeat such massacres again and again](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/).

Meanwhile in Gaza, the Hamas-run health ministry has claimed that more than 9,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which could not be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned because Israel is also carrying out airstrikes in the south.

Foreigners and dual nationals started exiting Gaza via the Rafah border crossing with Egypt on Wednesday and this continued on Thursday, with Egypt’s foreign ministry saying it will help evacuate “about 7,000″ people representing “more than 60” nationalities.

Hamas authorities claimed Thursday morning that the power generator of the Indonesian Hospital in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip had gone out of service.

Gaza health officials have been warning that hospitals were in imminent danger of closing since the first days of the war.

Health ministry spokesperson Ashraf Al-Qudra said in a televised statement that the Indonesian Hospital was running on a smaller backup generator but had to turn off lights in most rooms, shut down oxygen generators and resort to oxygen cylinders, and turn off mortuary refrigerators.

“These exceptional measures will allow the Indonesian Hospital to work for a matter of days,” Al-Qudra said. “However, if we cannot secure electricity or fuel then we will face a disaster.”

While some aid trucks have entered the blockaded Gaza Strip since the war began last month, Israel has not allowed trucks to bring fuel, which Hamas needs to run the ventilation and electricity in its vast tunnel network.

Israel says that Hamas has hundreds of thousands of liters of fuel that it could supply to hospitals and other civilians. The IDF on Wednesday released a recording of an intelligence intercept of a conversation in which a Hamas commander repeatedly alludes to Hamas taking fuel from Indonesian Hospital’s stocks.

The Palestine Telecommunications Company, Paltel, says that there has again been “a complete interruption of all communications and internet services” in the Gaza Strip, as Israel moves forward with its offensive in the enclave against Hamas terrorists.

In a statement on the social media platform X, Paltel says that international access has been severed

The leaders in charge of directing Israel’s war in Gaza vowed Saturday to soldier on with the grinding military offensive aimed at vanquishing the Hamas terror group, pushing back at international pressure to slow down or halt it, and pledging to “stand firm against the world if necessary.”

In a joint press conference, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Minister Benny Gantz rejected mounting international criticism over the civilian costs of the war, urging Western leaders to throw their support behind the Jewish state since its victory would mean victory for the entire free world as well.

Netanyahu slammed French President Emmanuel Macron over remarks he made castigating Israel a day earlier. He also indicated that Israel would oppose the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza following the war — a goal [declaredly](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/blinken-postwar-gaza-should-have-no-israeli-occupation-or-blockade/) sought by Washington — lambasting it as an entity that educates children to want to eliminate Israel, supports terrorism and hasn’t condemned Hamas’s October 7 massacres, which sparked the ongoing war. And he said Israel would retain overall security control in the enclave.

The pushback came after several countries over the weekend expressed concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the civilian casualties in the Strip.

On Friday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [urged](https://www.timesofisrael.com/blinken-says-far-too-many-palestinians-have-been-killed-in-israel-hamas-war/) for more to be done to protect civilians in Gaza and ensure humanitarian aid reaches them, saying that “far too many Palestinians have been killed” during the war

And Macron [said Friday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/macron-israel-must-stop-bombing-civilians-pm-says-hamas-responsible-for-their-deaths/) that there was “no justification” for Israel’s alleged bombing of “these babies, these ladies, these old people,” reiterating his call for a ceasefire in Gaza and telling the BBC: “There is no reason for that and no legitimacy. So we do urge Israel to stop.”

In the Saturday evening press conference, Netanyahu urged worldwide backing for his opposition to a ceasefire that doesn’t include a return of the hundreds of hostages being held in Gaza by Palestinian terrorists, and called on Americans to join the demand for the destruction of Hamas, which he said poses a danger to them too. He charged that most Americans share that realization.

He noted that in some countries, there are those who are pressuring the leaders to push for a ceasefire, an apparent reference to mass pro-Palestinian demonstrations calling for such a move, such as a [mass rally Saturday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/many-thousands-march-against-israel-in-london-on-armistice-day-demand-gaza-ceasefire/) in London.

“Don’t cave to the pressure,” Netanyahu said. “Our war is your war. Israel has to win for its own sake and for the world.”

In any case, “no international pressure, no false allegations about IDF soldiers and our state,” he said, will impact Israel’s insistence on protecting itself.

Israel will “stand firm against the world if necessary,” Netanyahu asserted.

Addressing Macron’s criticism, Netanyahu said: “He made a serious mistake, factually and morally. It’s Hamas preventing the evacuation of civilians, not Israel.”

“Israel tells them to leave,” Netanyahu stressed, explaining that Hamas, not Israel, has fired on the humanitarian corridor set up for northern Gazans to evacuate, and that Hamas is using the civilians as human shields.

“It’s not Israel that locates itself in hospitals, in schools, in UNRWA and UN facilities — it’s Hamas. Therefore, it is not Israel but Hamas that is responsible for harm to civilians,” Netanyahu argued.

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If the free world sanctifies the terrorists’ practice of fighting from among civilians, committing the double war crime of targeting and slaughtering civilians while hiding behind their own civilians, then this foul practice will spread, he warned.

“And I say to the president of France and our other friends — it will reach you too,” he said. “Immunity must not given to terrorists who carry out this double war crime. We are truly doing everything to minimize harm to civilians or noncombatants, but we will not give Hamas the license to murder our citizens without our response. We can do without the moral preaching.”

France sought to walk back the remarks Saturday, with a French diplomatic source stressing that Macron had “never implied and does not think that Israeli forces are deliberately targeting civilians. He has been consistently qualifying Hamas’s use of hostages or civilian population as unacceptable blackmail.”

The source also reiterated Macron’s condemnation of the October 7 Hamas onslaught, while also asserting his wish that more be done to alleviate the humanitarian situation.

### No to the PA

In his address, Netanyahu also said the military will remain in Gaza “as long as necessary” to prevent the enclave from being used to launch terror attacks against Israel. “Hamas will be demilitarized; there will be no further threat from the Gaza Strip on Israel, and to ensure that, for all long as necessary, IDF will control Gaza security to prevent terror from there.”

He also indicated Israel would oppose the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza following the war — a goal sought by Washington — as the territory cannot be ruled by “a civil authority that educates its children to hate Israel, to kill Israelis, to eliminate the State of Israel… an authority that pays the families of murderers [amounts] based on the number they murdered… an authority whose leader still has not condemned the terrible [October 7] massacre 30 days later.”

Netanyahu also responded to a [Saturday meeting of Muslim leaders in Riyadh](https://www.timesofisrael.com/muslim-leaders-blast-israeli-crimes-iran-solution-is-palestine-from-river-to-sea/) — including Syria’s President Bashar Assad, Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, among other authoritarians — which served as a platform for scathing criticism of what they alleged were Israel’s violations of international law during the war.

Israel’s intense aerial and ground offensive targeting Hamas infrastructure has killed over 11,000 people, according to the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza. The figure cannot be verified independently and is believed to include members of terror groups and civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rockets. Netanyahu urged Arab heads of state to “take a stand against Hamas,” adding that the terror group had only “brought disaster to Gaza; only bloodshed and poverty.”

Furthermore, it is an integral part of Iran’s axis of terror and evil, he said, and that axis “endangers the whole world and the whole Arab world.”

Netanyahu stated he has been working to ensure international support for the IDF, and declared that in the wake of the Hamas atrocities, “everybody in the free world has a moral obligation to support Israel.”

At Saturday’s summit in Riyadh, speeches and discussions focused on Israel’s actions and ignored the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7, when thousands of Palestinian terrorists slaughtered some 1,200 people, mostly civilians butchered in their homes or at a music festival, and kidnapped at least 244 hostages into Gaza.

The final declaration released at the Riyadh summit Saturday rejected Israel’s assertions that it is acting in self-defense and demanded that the United Nations Security Council adopt “a decisive and binding resolution” to halt Israel’s “aggression.” It also called for an end to weapons sales to Israel and dismissed out of hand any future political resolution to the conflict that would keep Gaza separate from the West Bank.

During the meeting, Mohammed bin Salman, the Gulf kingdom’s de facto ruler, blamed the “occupation, siege and the settlements” for the ongoing conflict and called for their end.

Salman shook hands with Iran’s Raisi, who was on his first trip to Saudi Arabia since the two countries mended ties in March, and said that Islamic countries should designate the Israeli army a “terrorist organization” for its conduct in Gaza.

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Raisi told the summit that the only solution to the conflict is a Palestinian state from the “river to the sea” — meaning an elimination of the State of Israel — and urged sanctions against Jerusalem.

### ‘The people of Israel in 2023 are not in the year 1943’

Speaking after the premier, Gallant similarly hit out at criticism of Israel, in remarks that appeared partly aimed at Macron.

He highlighted the fate of Kfir Bibas, a 10-month-old baby from Kibbutz Nir Oz, who [along with his family was abducted into Gaza](https://www.timesofisrael.com/taken-captive-yarden-and-shiri-bibas-and-their-redheaded-babies/).

Gallant said he has a grandchild the same age, and expressed grave concern for Kfir.

“Who is looking after him… among those savages? A toddler who doesn’t walk yet… We have a supreme obligation to bring the hostages home,” he said.

I hear some [world leaders] and ask myself and ask them: How can you be so bold as to preach morals to us at the height of combat? One thousand and five hundred soldiers, civilians, women and children were abducted or killed… It happened only a month ago. Everyone saw what happened,” Gallant continued.

“I want to say to those European leaders who criticize us: the State of Israel and the people of Israel in 2023 are not in the year 1943,” he added. “We have the means and the obligation to defend ourselves, by ourselves, and that’s what we’ll do. We will not rest until we’ve carried out our mission, and carried it out so that Hamas is defeated.”

“When the war is over, there will be no terror organization called Hamas,” he vowed.

Speaking after Gallant, Gantz addressed regional leaders, emphasizing that the ongoing operation in Gaza was a moral one.

“You need to act so that a different reality will be possible afterward, and so that Gaza will not again be held by those whose hands are covered in the blood of the innocent,” he said.

“It is Hamas that brought ruin upon the residents of Gaza. It should be pressured and attacked, so that the hostages are returned and so that the day will come when the war will be over,” he added.

Referring to Saturday’s summit in Riyadh, Gantz said Israel will not countenance moral preaching from Syria’s Assad, “the slaughterer of his own people” — in reference to the country’s brutal crackdown on rebels and widespread killing of civilians during its civil war — or from “the hangman from Iran,” a reference to Raisi, who oversaw the summary executions of thousands of Iranians in the late 1980s.

“Those who shook hands with the leader of Iran remember what Iran has done,” he said, in an apparent reference to the handshake with the Saudi crown prince.

Regional leaders can help the Palestinians with humanitarian needs, and need to remember “that the reality requires a changed regime in Gaza,”

While Israel agreed in its hostage deal with Hamas to allow at least 200 trucks of humanitarian aid into Gaza for every day of the multi-day truce, the current aid delivery mechanisms the IDF has in place are unlikely to enable this much-needed increase in assistance, two Biden administration officials have told The Times of Israel.

Accordingly, Washington has been pressuring Israel to reopen its Kerem Shalom crossing with Gaza to help facilitate the entry of more aid into the enclave both during the four-day-plus truce and beyond, the administration officials said Wednesday.

Israel has refused to reopen Kerem Shalom since Hamas’s October 7 onslaught and only allowed aid to enter Gaza through Egypt’s Rafah crossing two weeks into the war, arguing that it would not directly supply the Strip with assistance as long as the hostages remained there. Officials have also indicated Jerusalem will seek to disconnect from the Strip in the longer term, and no longer supply it with resources and merchandise as it has done for many years, leaving the task to Egypt and international actors.

As they try to provide aid to the war-torn Strip, aid organizations have sought to make do with just the Rafah crossing with Egypt, but only on several days since that crossing opened has the number of trucks eclipsed the initially set goal of 100.

Roughly 1,500 trucks of aid have entered since Rafah reopened on October 21, averaging less than 45 trucks a day.

Before the war, which has displaced 1.5 million people, some 500 trucks of aid entered Gaza each day, primarily through Israel’s Kerem Shalom crossing.The two Biden administration officials cited several reasons for the underwhelming amount of aid that has been able to enter Gaza through Rafah, pointing first to a complicated inspection system, which has trucks first inspected in Egypt, then enter Israel’s Nitzana crossing where they are examined by Israeli authorities, before being returned to Egypt and ferried through Rafah.

This extra round of inspections was not in place before the war, but Israel has insisted on the additional step over the past month, citing fears that Hamas will try to smuggle in weapons and other supplies for military use.

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The US officials also pointed to problems with Egypt’s El-Arish Airport, which is the only one receiving shipments of aid that are then driven into Gaza through Rafah. The airport has only one runway and very limited parking, making it unsuitable for the mass deliveries that are needed for the coastal enclave.

The Biden administration has been quietly pushing Israel to reconsider its policy of keeping Kerem Shalom closed, proposing that the crossing could at the very least be used for inspections or for trucks to exit Gaza after delivering aid, thus easing the load on Rafah, one senior administration official said.

US humanitarian envoy David Satterfield acknowledged in a Tuesday interview that “the Israeli government has made very clear that it is not prepared to see that change.”

But Washington intends to continue raising the issue, the two administration officials said.

Israel’s stance has been “really problematic because the level of aid going into Gaza now is totally unsustainable” as the humanitarian situation worsens and more people are reliant on assistance, the senior administration official warned, while acknowledging that Israeli officials have insisted that they’ll be able to meet the truce’s 200-truck minimum requirement.

The official argued that the refusal to reopen Kerem Shalom is “completely political,” given that there are no current security concerns about allowing aid into Gaza through that crossing.

A second administration official asserted that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government was most exposed to public criticism when the premier first agreed to allow aid in through Rafah last month after vowing that it wouldn’t do so. But with Rafah now already operating, opening Kerem Shalom as well comes with far less political risk, the official posited.

“The [Israelis], rightfully so, have made a point to highlight the aid they’ve been allowing in, recognizing that it gives them more international legitimacy to continue the military operation,” said the second administration official. “But it can’t just be a talking point.”

WASHINGTON (JTA) — If the provisions of a [hostage deal approved early Wednesday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/cabinet-approves-deal-for-return-of-50-hostages-in-exchange-for-multi-day-ceasefire/) bear out and Hamas releases dozens of Israeli hostages amid a temporary halt in the fighting in Gaza, US officials will celebrate alongside the Israelis.

But then will come the questions about how, and whether, Israel restarts its war to defeat the Palestinian terror group responsible for the mass abductions.

Analysts and scholars with ties to Israel’s government say security officials are already anticipating those questions, as it appears that Hamas is set to release some 50 hostages — mostly women and children — this week. In exchange, Israel will release about three times as many imprisoned underage and female Palestinian terror convicts, and will pause its ground operation in Gaza for at least four days

Jonathan Schanzer, a vice president of the conservative-leaning Foundation for Defense of Democracies, who has been speaking to Israeli government officials, said he expects the initial pause to lead to demands for a longer break in the fighting.

“Once there’s calm there are going to be international efforts to extend the calm because as far as the international community goes, quiet is a good thing,”Israel has vowed to restart its campaign after the pause, but calls for a long-term ceasefire are already increasing internationally and among US Democrats in Congress. Recently, a rising number of Congress members and senators — including some Jewish lawmakers — have voiced calls for a ceasefire or criticized Israel’s conduct in Gaza. About 40 Democrats in total have [called](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-more-us-jewish-democrats-join-growing-calls-for-a-gaza-ceasefire/) for a ceasefire, although a number of their statements are qualified with demands that Hamas be dismantled and all the hostages be released — which are also Israel’s stated goals.

Watching how those Democrats respond during the anticipated pause in fighting will be key to understanding whether US support will further erode, said Kevin Rachlin, the vice president of public affairs for J Street, the liberal Jewish Israel lobby that is influential among Democrats.

He pointed to a letter signed this week by 13 Senate Democrats, calling on Biden to press Israel to come up with a detailed plan for “sustained humanitarian aid” for Gazan Palestinians.“The growing pressure that we’re seeing right now is not just [because of] the civilian death toll but also on the finite definition of what does success look like with this military operation?” Rachlin said. “I think with a pause, that allows more of these questions to come into the forefront. You’ll start to see more members talk and ask about that more forcefully.”

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Israel during the pause, the Israeli news site Walla reported late Tuesday. It will be his fourth trip to the country since the deadly Hamas onslaught on October 7.

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The Biden administration continues to back Israel’s war aims — although it too wants to know how Israel will conduct the war once the pause is over. In a call with reporters last week, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the administration had questions about how Israel would expand its military campaign in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, considering that Israel previously encouraged hundreds of thousands of civilians to move southward while it waged war with Hamas in the north.

“As they consider moving their operations to the south, we have said we don’t support those kinds of operations absent a cohesive plan by the Israelis to factor in how they’re going to be able to protect what is now mathematically a dramatically increased civilian population, because they were evacuated from the north at Israel’s urging,” he said.

Extending the pause into a ceasefire is not an option for Israel, which has vowed to eradicate Hamas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday evening as his cabinet met to vote on the terms of the hostage release.

“I am here to say the war will continue” after the release, Netanyahu said in a press conference before the vote. “We will not give up until we achieve absolute victory and we return them all.”

Schanzer said the demands of the Israeli public left no other choice for Netanyahu.

“The Israeli government is or was deemed to be in violation of its contract with the people of the south” on October 7, when Hamas terrorists breached Gaza’s border with southern Israel and killed 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and abducted over 240 people, Schanzer said.

To restore trust with its population, Schanzer said, “from the government’s perspective, the goal is to completely clean out Hamas from the Gaza Strip so that the southern communities can return and live normal peaceful lives. Every Israeli that I’ve talked to since the start of this war has said that there cannot be a return to [the status quo of] October 6.”

In response to a Jewish Telegraphic Agency question, a spokesman for the Biden administration’s National Security Council said its support for Israel’s war against Hamas would not wane, citing a statement from a Hamas spokesman vowing to repeat the October 7 atrocities.

“What we do not support are calls for Israel to stop defending itself from Hamas terrorists, which is what a permanent ceasefire would be,” the spokesman said, “Hamas has warned that what happened on October 7th ‘will happen again and again and again’ until Israel is annihilated. These comments are horrifying and are an important reminder of how much is at stake.”

Still, it was clear from the spokesman’s reply that the Biden administration still had questions about how Israel will conduct its war once it resumes. Biden officials are not happy with the frequency and extent of the humanitarian pauses Israel has recently agreed to.

“For a humanitarian pause to be fully successful, we have to have in place a system to maximize aid delivery and ensure the protection of humanitarian workers while also working to secure the release of hostages, and prevent the terrorists from using the pause to take advantage,” said the spokesman. “This is complex and we are continuing to work in earnest towards this goal.”

Kirby mentioned one measure of “fully successful” in his call with the media: the amount of humanitarian aid Israel allows into Gaza. “Our incremental goal was about [trucks of aid] 150 a day and we’re not close to achieving that,

Since Israel declared war after Hamas’s October 7 shock assault, the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry says that more than 14,000 people have been killed, including thousands of children. The figures cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include both civilians and Hamas members killed, including as a consequence of terror groups’ own rocket misfires.

David Makovsky, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which has close ties to the US and Israeli governments, said the pause would give Israel an opportunity to present to the Biden administration a detailed plan for its next steps.

“It’s a way for Israel to explain to the US what it looks like,” he said of the continuation of the war. “Now you have 2 million people all in the south, and you’re going to have to navigate that,” he said. “That’s where, I think, the US needs to be convinced.”

As of now, Biden stands as a bulwark against pressure for a ceasefire, Makovsky said, but that could change if the war becomes a quagmire with no clear way out.

“He’s going to be supportive but if he feels that Israel is stalled and that it’s not making progress on the objective, then I think there will probably be a reassessment,”RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Saudi Arabia on Wednesday roundly condemned an Israeli airstrike in the Jabaliya refugee camp on Tuesday in which the IDF said they killed the commander of Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion, Ibrahim Biari.

Israel said it had targeted a Hamas tunnel complex under the densely populated Jabaliya camp on Tuesday, killing Biari, who it believes was involved in the terror group’s October 7 attacks, as well as several other terrorists.

Palestinian reports have stated that dozens of people in the area were killed during the strike and AFP witnessed at least 47 bodies being recovered from the scene.

The IDF airstrike in Jabaliya was part of a “wide-scale strike” against Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Batallion. Israel [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-idf-soldiers-killed-in-gaza-as-troops-take-hamas-post-kill-commander-50-terrorists/) buildings collapsed due to Hamas tunnels running underneath the area, which had destabilized the ground. It said 50 terrorists, including one of the Hamas commanders responsible for the October 7 slaughter of Israelis, were killed in the incident, which also involved ground forces.

The strike was the latest development in Israel’s war against Hamas, which erupted on October 7 when some 2,500 Hamas terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing over 230 hostages of all ages under the cover of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

In response, Israel vowed to eradicate the Gaza terror group and launched an offensive aimed at destroying Hamas’s military and governance capabilities.

Saudi Arabia denounced the strike “in the strongest terms possible,” decrying the “inhumane targeting” of the refugee camp “by the Israeli occupation forces.”

The attack, Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry said, had “caused the death and injury of a large number of innocent civilians.”

The statement from Riyadh was the latest sign the Israel-Hamas war has fractured efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Before Hamas launched the deadliest attack in Israel’s history on October 7, the United States had been close to brokering a deal that would have seen Saudi Arabia — home to Islam’s holiest sites — recognize Israel for the first time.

Supporters of the deal believe it could have transformed the Middle East, after decades in which Israel had very limited diplomatic, commercial and security ties with its neighbors.

In October, a source familiar with that process told AFP that Riyadh had decided to “pause discussion on possible normalization.”

Saudi Arabia had previously warned Israel against any further ground operations in the Gaza Strip, where Israel continues to press on with its goal of eliminating the ruling terror group.

The Hamas-run Gaza health ministry has stated that Israeli strikes have killed more than 8,500 people. However, the figures cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include both civilians and Hamas members killed in Gaza, including as a consequence of terror groups’ own rocket misfires.

Thirteen Israeli soldiers were killed Tuesday in fighting deep inside Gaza, including seven troops from the Givati Infantry Brigade’s Tzabar Battalion [killed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-9-soldiers-killed-battling-hamas-deep-inside-gaza-as-military-toll-mounts/) when a Namer armored personnel carrier they were in was hit by an anti-tank guided missile fired by Hamas.

Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu said Sunday that one of Israel’s options in the war against Hamas could be to drop a nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip, in comments that were quickly disavowed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also suspended the minister from cabinet meetings.

Eliyahu, a member of National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir’s far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, was speaking in an answer to a question in a radio interview.

“Your expectation is that tomorrow morning we’d drop what amounts to some kind a nuclear bomb on all of Gaza, flattening them, eliminating everybody there…,”

“That’s one way,” Eliyahu responded. “The second way is to work out what’s important to them, what scares them, what deters them… They’re not scared of death.”

Eliyahu does not have any connection to the three-member war cabinet directing the war against the Hamas terror group, nor is he part of the broader security cabinet.

When it was pointed out to the minister that there are some 240 hostages currently held in the Gaza Strip, Eliyahu doubled down.

“I pray and hope for their return, but there is a price to be paid in war,” he said. “Why are the lives of the abductees, whose release I really want, more important than the lives of the soldiers and the people who will be murdered later?”

Eliyahu also voiced objection to allowing any humanitarian aid into Gaza, saying, “we wouldn’t hand the Nazis humanitarian aid,” and charging that “there is no such thing as uninvolved civilians in Gaza.”

He also backed retaking the Strip and rebuilding the Israeli settlements that existed there before Israel withdrew from the area unilaterally in 2005, and when asked about the fate of the Palestinian population, he said: “They can go to Ireland or deserts; the monsters in Gaza should find a solution by themselves.”

Eliyahu also said the northern part of the Strip has no right to exist, adding that anyone waving a Palestinian or Hamas flag “shouldn’t continue to live on the face of the earth.

Netanyahu was quick to reject Eliyahu’s claim that dropping a nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip was a possibility.

“Amichai Eliyahu’s words are detached from reality,” Netanyahu said in a statement. “Israel and the IDF are acting in accordance with the highest standards of international law in order to prevent harm to uninvolved people, and we will continue to do that all the way to victory.”

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also condemned the “baseless and irresponsible” remarks in a post on X, adding he was glad “these are not the people in charge of Israel’s security.”

Opposition Leader Yair Lapid called on Netanyahu to fire Eliyahu, branding his comments “a horrifying and insane remark by an irresponsible minister.”

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“He offended the families of the captives [being held in Gaza], offended Israeli society and harmed our international standing,” Lapid said. “The presence of the extremists in the government endangers us and the success of the war goals — defeating Hamas and returning the hostages.

“Netanyahu must fire him this morning,”

National Unity leader Minister Benny Gantz, a member of the war cabinet, also attacked Eliyahu’s comments.

“Eliyahu’s unnecessary and irresponsible statement is detrimental to the path and values ​​of Israel, causes heavy political damage and, worst of all, adds to the pain of the families of those abducted from their homes,” he wrote on X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter.

MK Mansour Abbas, leader of the Arab Ra’am party, said that Eliyahu was echoing a sentiment expressed by other officials, and expressed concerns that his comments dehumanized Gazans.

“Eliyahu’s words about bombing Gaza with an atomic bomb were heard in different versions on the television screens from other people,” Abbas claimed on X.

“Dehumanization and collective punishment is the way to genocide and war crimes. There will be a day after the war — it is not the end of history and it is not Armageddon,” he wrote. “I am sure, and believe from the bottom of my heart, that there will still be peace and reconciliation between the two peoples.”

Amid the growing outrage, the Prime Minister’s Office announced that Eliyahu was suspended from cabinet meetings indefinitely. However, he still participated in at least one phone vote later in the day, according to Hebrew media.

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Government ministers told the Ynet news site that the suspension was meaningless.

“This is a joke, there barely are any cabinet meetings anyway, and most of the work is being done in rounds of votes by phone,” an unnamed minister was quoted as saying.

Netanyahu initially sought to fire Eliyahu, but backpedaled after Ben Gvir said he would not go along with the move, Channel 12 news reported.

A cabinet meeting scheduled for Sunday has been canceled, with no alternative date set.

Eliyahu later attempted to walk back his assertion, tweeting that “it is clear to all sensible people that the statement about the atom is metaphorical.”

“However, a strong and disproportionate response to terrorism is definitely required, which will clarify to the Nazis and their supporters that terrorism doesn’t pay,” he wrote.

“This is the only formula that democratic states can use to deal with terrorism. At the same time, it is clear that the State of Israel is committed to doing everything possible to return the hostages safe and sound,” Eliyahu wrote.

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The far-right minister has a history of incendiary and offensive comments.

Earlier this year he [called](https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-minister-calls-bank-of-israel-governor-a-savage-netanyahu-condemns/) Bank of Israel governor Amir Yaron a “savage” and said he was causing damage to the State of Israel and should be fired, after Yaron raised the alarm about government’s controversial judicial overhaul program.

In April he [accused](https://www.timesofisrael.com/minister-accuses-security-chiefs-of-acting-in-rebellion-against-current-government/) top security officials of “rebelling” against the coalition.

Eliyahu is the scion of a prominent national-religious family — the grandson of Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, a former chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel, and the son of Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu, the rabbi of the northern city of Safed and a leading far-right ideologue.

Eliyahu’s father has been known for controversial statements and rulings on Jewish law, including one that forbade the rental or sale of Jewish-owned property in Safed to Arabs. He has also criticized the Reform movement, the LGBTQ community, and women serving in IDF combat units.

Meanwhile, far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich asserted Saturday that Israel “will control Gaza after the war.”

“I will not invest a shekel in shielding the Gaza border area,” said Smotrich, implying that it will not be necessary after the conclusion of the war.

“The most important thing is that there will be no more Hamas, that the Strip will be under the operational control of the IDF for years, and that we will not return to the same misconceptions,” he told Channel 12. “We will be there, we will rule there and we will maintain security.”

Israel launched its war against Hamas after the terror group carried out a brutal assault on southern Israel communities, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and taking over 240 hostages, including small children and the elderly.

In response to the killings, Israel vowed to eradicate the terror group and has since hit thousands of Hamas targets inside the Strip with airstrikes and an ongoing ground operation, saying that it is working to minimize civilian casualties in Gaza.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said Saturday that more than 9,400 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked war with its murderous assault. Hamas figures cannot be independently confirmed, and the terror group has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll. The figures do not differentiate between terror operatives and civilians nor between those killed in Israeli strikes and those killed by the hundreds of rockets fired by terror groups that have fallen short inside the Strip.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled to the south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned. Israel is also carrying out some airstrikes in the south.

South Africa will Tuesday host a virtual summit of the BRICS group of nations, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, to discuss the war between Israel and the Hamas terror group, Pretoria and Moscow said Monday.

The BRICS —  Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — are a group of major emerging economies seeking to reshape the US and Western-led global order.

Tuesday’s “Extraordinary Joint Meeting on the Middle East Situation in Gaza” will be hosted by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa in the hope of drawing up a common response to the more than six-week conflict.

Leaders from Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates — who are all due to join the BRICS group in January 2024 — will attend the meeting.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will also participate, the South African presidency said in a statement

It added that all five BRICS heads of state will join the virtual summit, after which a joint statement with particular reference to Gaza is expected.

War erupted after Hamas’s October 7 massacre, which saw some 3,000 terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,200 people and seizing over 240 hostages of all ages.

In Gaza, officials say around 13,300 people, more than 5,500 of them children, have been killed in Israel’s retaliatory air and ground offensive, which aims to destroy the terror group’s infrastructure. The figures are issued by the Hamas-run health ministry and cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include both civilians and Hamas members killed in Gaza, including as a consequence of terror groups’ own rocket misfires.

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South Africa has long been a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause, with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party often linking it to its own struggle against apartheid.

The ANC [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/south-africas-ruling-party-calls-for-suspension-of-israel-ties/) last Thursday that it would support a parliamentary motion to suspend diplomatic relations with Israel until it agrees to a ceasefire in Gaza, decrying the “genocidal actions of the Israeli regime.”

On Friday, South Africa joined four other nations in calling for an International Criminal Court investigation into the Israel-Hamas war.

China has historically been sympathetic to the Palestinians and supportive of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Beijing has been calling for an immediate ceasefire since the start of the war last month.

India, which has tried to balance its current close ties with Israel and its traditional support for the Palestinians, may be a moderating voice.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused the West of stoking tensions in the Middle East, and criticized Israel for its conduct in the conflict.

Putin skipped the last BRICS annual summit in Johannesburg, as he is the target of an International Criminal Court arrest warrant — a provision that South Africa as an ICC member would be expected to implement if he were to set foot in the country.

“advanced terror activity with funding of tens of thousands of shekels, and helped wanted persons and terrorist operatives.”“took a significant part in escalating the security situation in the region,” and that his son was a local terror operative.“central inciter of violence in Judea and Samaria, calling for terror attacks against soldiers and Israel while taking advantage of his public standing,” the statement said, using the biblical terms for the West Bank.

“Given his status in Judea and Samaria and overseas, his actions constituted a high threat that warranted his immediate arrest, the statement said.

Fatah is the ruling party of the Palestinian Authority and has largely cooperated with Israel in trying to combat West Bank terror in recent years.

Later, Israeli troops again entered Jenin to “foil terror infrastructure,” the IDF said.

The troops found and destroyed explosive devices planted in the roads and an underground tunnel used by gunmen. A car with ammunition and military equipment was also captured and confiscated.

The strike affected businesses, banks and universities, and was called to denounce the Israeli “aggression” in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and accompanied by calls to “escalate the confrontation with the occupation.”The majority of the hostages are civilians, some of them infants, young children and elderly people. Only a handful have been released, rescued by Israeli troops or were recovered dead.

“We are close to reaching a deal on a truce,” Haniyeh said, according to a statement sent by his office to AFP.

In a similar statement posted to Telegram, the Doha-based Haniyeh said Hamas had given its response to Qatar and other mediators, without elaborating.Hamas gunmen killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, during cross-border raids from the Gaza Strip on October 7 — the deadliest attack in Israel’s history.

In response, Israel launched a military campaign to topple Hamas from ruling Gaza and to release the hostages. The intense air, sea, and ground campaign is targeting terror infrastructure which Israel says is embedded among the civilian population. Aid groups have warned of what they say is a growing humanitarian crisis with hundreds of thousands of people displaced and a shortage of basic supplie

They said the tentative deal includes a five-day truce, comprising a ceasefire on the ground and limits to Israeli air operations over southern Gaza.

Under the agreement, between 50 and 100 Israeli civilian and foreign hostages would be released, but no military personnel.

In exchange, some 300 Palestinians would be released from Israeli jails, among them women and children.

According to the Hamas and PIJ sources, the deal would also allow for up to 300 trucks of food and medical aid to enter Gaza.

Hamas Gaza chief Yahya Sinwar is also insisting on the halt to all air operations, the Walla outlet reported.

Channel 12 has previously reported that Hamas sought an Israeli commitment not to use its observation drones during the five-day lull to keep tabs on what Hamas is up to, and where it is moving the hostages from

While there was no official Israeli confirmation, Channel 12 cited a senior Israeli official Tuesday as saying “we are very close to a deal.”

Noting that there are still technical issues to resolve, the official said there is an agreement that at least 50 people will be freed, while dozens more could be released in exchange for extending a ceasefire beyond the initial few days.

Those set to be released are expected to be children, their mothers and other women, Channel 12 said.

Army Radio reported that the IDF Home Front Command’s operation division is believed to be preparing for an exchange plan.

The station cited security officials as saying that the IDF would remain in the Gaza Strip and that troops would not be pulled back into Israeli territory during the ceasefire.

A key humanitarian corridor along the Salah a-Din road leading from northern to southern Gaza would remain open to enable residents of the north to evacuate to the south.

However, the IDF will not permit residents who already evacuated to return to their neighborhoods during the ceasefire. The army is working on preparing capabilities to make sure that Hamas does not violate the ceasefire, including by using an extensive tunnel network the terror group dug under Gaza to deploy fighters. Any threat to Israeli forces that is identified will immediately be attacked, the report said, even during the ceasefire.

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Education Minister Yoav Kisch told Army Radio, “We must not support a deal that would make us stop the war effort. Hamas will try to give us as few hostages as possible and create a reality in which we cannot continue to pressure it.”

Hopes had been growing for talks brokered by Qatar, where Hamas has a political office and which has behind-the-scenes diplomatic links with Israel.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said Monday that its president had traveled to Qatar to meet Hamas’s Haniyeh. The ICRC said it calls for the release of hostages but is not part of any negotiations.

### ‘We will not stop fighting’

An agreement could bring some respite for Gazans who have lived for more than six weeks with Israel’s airstrikes and an expanding ground offensive.

Large parts of Gaza have been destroyed by airstrikes that have numbered in the thousands, and the territory is under blockade, with tight controls over food, water and fuel allowed to enter. Israel has said there is no shortage of essential supplies and accuses Hamas of plundering resources for its military apparatus — fuel, in particular — rather than distributing them to the civilian population. Israeli officials say Hamas needs the fuel to run the ventilation and electricity in its vast tunnel network.

Israel has vowed to press ahead with its offensive, pledging to crush Hamas and ensure the hostages are released.

“We will not stop fighting until we bring our hostages home,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared Monday after [meeting relatives of those abducted](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-meets-with-families-of-hostages-held-in-gaza-as-reports-swirl-of-imminent-deal/) along with the two other ministers in his war cabinet.

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Udi Goren, whose cousin is Gaza hostage Tal Haimi, told reporters after coming out of the meeting that the war cabinet did not share any details about any possible deal to release the hostages.

Netanyahu’s office has repeatedly [cautioned](https://www.timesofisrael.com/no-deal-yet-pm-shoots-down-incorrect-reports-of-imminent-hostage-agreement/) against various media reports regarding the hostage negotiations, adding that it would formally notify the public in the event that a deal is actually reached.

On Monday, US President Joe Biden was asked during the annual turkey pardoning ceremony on the White House lawn in the run up to Thursday’s US Thanksgiving holiday, whether a hostage deal was close to being reached, to which he responded: “I believe so… yes.”

He added that he could not speak publicly about it any further and then raised his hand up to show that his fingers were crossed in the hope that a deal would take place soon.

On Sunday, Channel 12 reported that while Israel was demanding the release of all hostage children and their mothers — about 53 people — Hamas is claiming it does not know the location of them all, as the hostages are being held by various factions and cells, and needs the pause in fighting to determine where they all are.

So far efforts by Qatar have led to the release of four of the hostages. A fifth hostage, a soldier, was rescued in an Israeli operation. Israel has also found the bodies of two hostages near the Shifa hospital in Gaza.

The families of hostages have been organizing protests, rallies, and marches to press the government on securing their loved ones’ release. On Saturday, families of hostages and thousands of their supporters demonstrated in Tel Aviv’s Hostages Square in a rally focused in particular on the some 40 children believed held in Gaza.

According to Gaza’s Hamas-run health authorities, more than 13,000 Palestinians have been killed, two-thirds of them women and minors. Those figures cannot be independently verified, and Hamas has been accused of inflating them and of designating gunmen in their late teens as children. It is not known how many among its total are combatants, and how many among the dead were victims of misfired rockets aimed at Israel

We’re actively helping the Israelis to do a number of things,Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas and free the hostages, while diplomats from Qatar and other countries have attempted to negotiate their release.

Maier, who is the Pentagon’s senior special operations policy official, told the conference a key objective for the US personnel is to “identify hostages, including American hostages.”

“It’s really our responsibility to do so,”

Maier said the US commandos have not been given any combat roles but were discussing with Israeli forces the situation in Gaza for “what is going to be a very complex fight going forward.”

Though Maier would not reveal how many special operations forces are in Israel the NY Times cited other unnamed US officials as saying several dozen have been sent in the past few days. There was already a small team in Israel on October 7 for previously arranged training.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the newspaper that the commandos were joining FBI, State Department and other US hostage-recovery specialists who are working with Israeli counterparts.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin is known to be holding near daily discussions with Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in which he has reportedly stressed that any ground incursion into Gaza must be carefully handled due to the complexity of fighting in a tightly populated urban area, further complicated by the networks of tunnels Hamas has dug under the Strip to hide and moves its forces.

“We will work with them as much as possible to help advise them on those types of activities,” Maier said.

Vice President Kamala Harris said in an interview aired Sunday that Washington would not send troops to Israel or Gaza, amid domestic worries that the US could get entangled in another costly conflict in the Middle East.

“to help our own citizens get out of places and to help our embassies be secure.”he Hamas-run health ministry has claimed more than 8,500 people have been killed in the enclave, a figure that cannot be independently verified. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and it also does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. The terror group has pushed back against such claims, releasing an unverified list of names it says represent those killed. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties and urging the civilian population to evacuate to southern Gaza. Troops are already operating on the ground in Gaza

The “voluntary” resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza is slowly becoming a key official policy of the government, with a senior official saying that Israel has held talks with several countries for their potential absorption.

Zman Israel, The Times of Israel’s Hebrew sister site, has learned that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition is conducting secret contacts for accepting thousands of immigrants from Gaza with Congo, in addition to other nations.

“Congo will be willing to take in migrants, and we’re in talks with others,”

Congo has high levels of inequality, and 52.5 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, [according](https://www.wfp.org/countries/congo) to the World Food Programme.

Meanwhile, Gaza is facing a growing humanitarian crisis amid the Israel-Hamas war, which was sparked on October 7 when thousands of terrorists stormed the border and rampaged through southern Israeli communities, massacring some 1,200 and kidnapping approximately 240 more as hostages in the Strip.

Our problem is [finding] countries that are willing to absorb Gazans, and we are working on it,” he said.

The prime minister was responding to Likud MK Danny Danon, who claimed that “the world is already discussing the possibilities of voluntary immigration,” though the idea has been roundly rejected by the international community

The far-right Religious Zionism and Otzma Yehudit parties, headed by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, respectively, have [backed the plans for migration](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ministers-call-for-resettling-gazas-palestinians-building-settlements-in-strip/).

On Tuesday, the US State Department called out Smotrich and Ben Gvir for advocating the resettlement of Palestinians outside of Gaza, [slamming](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-slams-irresponsible-calls-by-smotrich-and-ben-gvir-for-emigration-of-gazans/) their rhetoric as “inflammatory and irresponsible.” Smotrich dismissed the comments on Wednesday, claiming that over 70 percent of Israelis support the idea of “encouraging voluntary immigration” because “two million people [in Gaza] wake up every morning with the desire to destroy the State of Israel.”

Netanyahu’s office has issued statements in the past publicly insisting that Smotrich and Ben Gvir do not represent government policy on the matter, despite his own comments last week in support of a population transfer.“voluntary migration is the best and most realistic program for the day after the fighting ends.”

On Tuesday, during a conference held in the Knesset to examine possibilities for postwar Gaza, Gamliel said: “At the end of the war, Hamas rule will collapse. There are no municipal authorities; the civilian population will be entirely dependent on humanitarian aid. There will be no work, and 60% of Gaza’s agricultural land will become security buffer zones.”

In internal discussions, Gamliel presented a map of the Gaza Strip after the fighting that shows remaining residents boxed in. Israel would cut ties with Gaza and expand its security buffer zones; control the Philadelphi Corridor, which runs along the 14-kilometer (8.7-mile) Gaza-Egypt border (a plan [attacked](https://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-lawmaker-pans-netanyahus-postwar-gaza-ideas-as-violation-of-peace-treaty/) by an Egyptian lawmaker on Saturday after it was announced by Netanyahu); and establish a permanent naval blockade

Gamliel said that Gaza must not be handed over to the Palestinian Authority, and Gazans must not be left in the Strip to be educated to hate, as that would mean that further attacks on Israel are only a matter of time. While rejecting the PA’s return, the government has offered few details on what political entity it wants to rule Gaza.

“The Gaza problem is not just our problem,” Gamliel said. “The world should support humanitarian emigration, because that’s the only solution I know.”

Likud’s Danon is another of the leading supporters of the plan to encourage Gazans to leave the Strip.

On Tuesday, he presented his five-step plan at a conference in the Knesset (demobilization, establishing a security buffer zone, Israeli presence at the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, voluntary emigration, and eradicating the terrorist atmosphere).

In November, he [published](https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-israeli-lawmakers-call-on-european-countries-to-take-in-gaza-refugees/) an op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal along with Yesh Atid MK Ram Ben Barak in which the two detailed the plan for Palestinian migration for the first time, calling for “countries around the world to accept limited numbers of Gazan families who have expressed a desire to relocate.” Ben Barak later seemed to walk back the piece, [claiming](https://www.timesofisrael.com/centrist-mk-says-call-on-european-countries-to-take-gaza-refugees-was-misunderstood/) he had “not been completely understood.”

The security cabinet was supposed to meet Tuesday evening to discuss what will happen in Gaza at the end of the war.

Ministers intended to present their plans and in talks between some of them, the idea was also raised to ask Saudi Arabia to take in hundreds of thousands of Palestinians for work. The Gulf kingdom is in the midst of a tremendous construction boom and employs close to half a million workers, who currently come mainly from India, Bangladesh and other countries.

However, the security cabinet discussion was postponed until Wednesday due to the need for security consultations after Hamas’s deputy political leader, Saleh al-Arouri — wanted for years by Israel and seen as the group’s prime orchestrator of West Bank terrorism — was [killed in an alleged Israeli strike](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-deputy-leader-saleh-al-arouri-killed-in-alleged-israeli-strike-in-beirut-suburb/) in the Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh.

The idea of resettling Gazans was expected to take center stage during Wednesday’s security cabinet meeting.

The discussion comes amid growing frustration in Washington with Netanyahu’s government, which the Biden administration has continued to support diplomatically and militarily in the war against Hamas but has increasingly sparred with regarding planning for Gaza once the fighting ends.

The Israel Defense Forces revealed new intelligence Sunday it said provided further evidence that the Hamas terror group is using medical facilities in the Gaza Strip for terror purposes.

IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari briefed international media outlets with video footage of Hamas gunmen emerging from a tunnel under Sheikh Hamad Hospital, as well firing at Israelis forces from within the building itself.

War erupted between Israel and Hamas last month when the Palestinian terror group launched a massive attack that killed over 1,400 people. Israel has repeatedly said Hamas is using civilians as human shields, including by locating operations bases under hospitals. Captured Hamas terrorists have [confirmed the claims](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-interrogation-video-hamas-terrorists-confirm-groups-hideout-under-gaza-hospital/), explaining that Hamas knows Israel will not bomb a medical center.

Today, I will be sharing evidence proving that Hamas systematically exploits hospitals as part of its war machine,” Hagari said. “We decided to declassify and share more sensitive intelligence with you, because the world must take immediate action.”

Hagari presented a video showing an underground entrance from Sheikh Hamad Hospital, which he said connects to Hamas tunnel networks believed to run for hundreds of kilometers under the Palestinian enclav

“If it weren’t enough that we exposed a tunnel under the hospital, the terrorists also shot at our soldiers from within the hospital,” He noted that construction of the hospital, located north of Gaza City, was funded by the Qatari government.

Hagari reported that the IDF has intelligence of a tunnel network under the so-called Indonesian Hospital, as well as aerial imagery showing rocket launchers a few dozen meters from the complex.

“Hamas systematically built the Indonesian Hospital to disguise its underground terror infrastructure,”

“Human shields are a key pillar of Hamas’s terror operations. Hamas systematically exploits hospitals as a key part of its war machine. This is the murderous organization we are dealing with. Hamas doesn’t even try to hide it. They say it loud and clear.”The IDF has previously accused Hamas of having its main base of operations [under Shifa Hospital](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamass-main-operations-base-is-under-shifa-hospital-in-gaza-city-says-idf/), the largest medical center in Gaza, as well as hoarding fuel for terror purposes.

“Hamas moves fuel from the [Shifa] hospital to terrorists in Jabaliya,” Hagari said referring to a city north of Gaza City. “They steal the fuel from the hospital to fuel terror infrastructure

Separately, Hagari said the IDF has carried out intense efforts to warn Palestinians to evacuate from northern Gaza to its south.

He said the Israeli Air Force dropped more than one and a half million fliers in northern Gaza, and made over 20,000 phone calls to key people in those areas, in order to get the civilian population to evacuate.

“Our war is with Hamas, not the civilians in Gaza. We will not accept Hamas’s cynical use of hospitals, to hide their terror infrastructure. Hamas’s exploitation of hospitals must come to an end,” Hagari said.

He added that Hamas is trying to prevent the IDF from opening evacuation routes that northern Strip residents can use to reach safety in the south.

“The IDF adjusted our ground operations to keep the corridors from the north to the south open, but Hamas is attacking our forces, like yesterday, that opened this corridor! This is why we had to stop the corridor yesterday. Hamas tries to prevent Gazans from moving south.”

Israel does conduct strikes in the Strip’s south as well, and civilians have reportedly been killed there along with Hamas operatives, but its activity in those areas is far more limited.

Separately, the IDF on Sunday shared footage of its troops locating [rocket-launching positions in civilian areas](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-troops-found-hamas-rocket-launchers-near-playground-swimming-pool-in-gaza/), amid efforts to uncover and destroy Hamas infrastructure. The terror group uses such sites to fire rockets at Israeli population centers.

Troops found four underground launchers some five meters (16 feet) from a children’s swimming pool, and around 30 meters from residential homes in the northern Gaza Strip, footage showed. Another clip showed troops locating a number of rocket launchers within a children’s playground and amusement park compound.

“This is further proof of the Hamas terror organization’s constant use of the civilian population as a human shield for terror purposes,” the IDF said in a statement.

The military has for weeks been urging northern Gaza residents to evacuate southward, warning them it will be focusing its military efforts on the Gaza City area, the heart of Hamas’s rule and its main base of operations in Gaza. At least 800,000 of some one million residents of the area have done so.

On Saturday morning, the IDF’s Arabic-language spokesman Lt. Col. Avichay Adraee announced that between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. the Strip’s north-to-south Salah a-Din road would be open for Palestinians to evacuate to southern Gaza.

The IDF said Hamas took advantage of the situation and launched mortars and anti-tank guided missiles at troops working to open up the road for civilians. No soldiers were injured.

US President Joe Biden has [also said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-says-hamas-using-innocent-gazans-as-human-shields-calls-netanyahu-pas-abbas/) that Hamas is using civilians as human shields.

Israel declared war with the aim of eradicating Hamas following the terror group’s devastating October 7 onslaught, in which thousands of terrorists stormed through the border and murdered some 1,400 people, mostly civilians killed in their homes and at a music festival, and abducted over 240 of all ages who are being held captive in Gaza. The Hamas assault came under a barrage of thousands of rockets fired across Israel. Hamas and other terror groups have continued to rain rockets on Israel, displacing over 200,000 Israelis.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said Sunday that more than 9,770 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked war with its murderous assault. Hamas figures cannot be independently confirmed, and the terror group has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll. The figures do not differentiate between terror operatives and civilians nor between those killed in Israeli strikes and those killed by the hundreds of rockets fired by terror groups that have fallen short inside the Strip.

To create some wiggle room in talks about recognizing Israel and to get the US pact back on track, Saudi officials have told their US counterparts that Riyadh would not insist Israel take concrete steps to create a Palestinian state and would instead accept a political commitment to a two-state solution, two senior regional sources said.Last month, two senior US officials and a senior Arab diplomat [told](https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-normalization-still-possible-post-war-but-price-for-israel-is-higher-officials/) The Times of Israel that while the broader interests of the countries involved have not changed since the October 7 attack, the price of the “significant Palestinian component” of the deal had in fact gone up.

Whereas Israel was being asked before the war to take limited steps to keep a two-state solution alive, the senior officials said it will now need to commit to establishing an irreversible pathway toward an eventual Palestinian state while also accepting the return of the Palestinian Authority to governing the Gaza Strip, which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has all but [rejected](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-said-to-reject-us-plan-for-saudi-normalization-in-return-for-path-to-palestinian-statehood/) in recent months.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Netanyahu during a visit to Tel Aviv last month that Arab stakeholders are willing to take part in the reconstruction of Gaza and that Saudi Arabia is willing to normalize relations with Israel if Jerusalem agrees to take steps to create a political horizon for the Palestinians, an Israeli official said, adding that Netanyahu did not appear open to the proposal.

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The premier said publicly afterward that he had rejected the American “attempt to impose on us a reality that will jeopardize us,” adding that he “will not compromise on full Israeli security control over all the territory west of the Jordan [River].”

While this does not leave room for a fully sovereign Palestinian state, PA President Mahmoud Abbas and successive US administrations have said the Palestinian state they seek to establish would be demilitarized.

For his part, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-arabias-top-envoy-no-recognizing-israel-without-path-to-palestinian-state/) last month that Riyadh will not normalize relations with Israel nor contribute to Gaza’s reconstruction without a credible pathway to a Palestinian state

Blinken is slated to arrive back in Israel on Sunday where he is again expected to raise the Saudi normalization talks with Netanyahu.

His trip comes days after reports that the US is considering unilaterally recognizing an independent Palestinian state and after UK Foreign Minister David Cameron announced that London was considering doing the same.

Earlier this week, Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer met with senior administration officials in Washington and relayed that Netanyahu is prepared to commit to a political horizon for the Palestinians but will not accept talk of a demilitarized Palestinian state, Channel 12 reported Friday, without citing any sources.Explaining Saudi Arabia’s approach to the Palestinian component of the negotiations, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington senior scholar Hussein Ibish said that before October 7, “it would have been good enough for Saudi Arabia for Israel to get involved in some sort of national negotiations with the PLO for the Palestinians, and the propping up of the PA, but without necessarily undertaking to the eventual recognition of a Palestinian state, and accepting the irrevocable principle of Palestinian statehood.”

Since the war’s breakout, though, demands regarding the Palestinian component of the deal have gone up. “Nobody is seriously expecting Israel to withdraw unilaterally from the West Bank or to recognize a Palestinian state that does not yet exist. What is required is for Israel to recognize the Palestinian right to a state and the need for a Palestinian state,” Ibish maintained.

The warning was one of several issued by the top US diplomat during his meeting with the war cabinet and in separate sit-downs with top officials. At a press conference, he also publicly cautioned Israel at considerable length against allowing the same scale of death and displacement in southern Gaza once fighting shifts there from northern Gaza.

During Thursday’s war cabinet meeting, ministers reportedly pushed back on some of Blinken’s concerns regarding how Israel has prosecuted the campaign, saying that the IDF follows the laws of war and has taken steps to avoid civilian casualties.

At one point in the meeting, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant noted that the Israeli public is united behind the goal of dismantling Hamas, even if it takes months, the Israeli official said.

Blinken responded that he wasn’t sure if Israel would have the international backing to continue fighting for so long at the same intensity that was seen before the war was temporarily paused in a truce deal last Friday, according to the official.

Blinken’s reported and public comments reflected growing unease in the US with the way Israel has carried out the war, which has resulted in scenes of widespread devastation in parts of the enclave and fears of a massive humanitarian catastrophe, with large numbers of Gazans left homeless, hungry and exposed to disease.

During his press conference Thursday night recapping his meetings in Israel, the secretary said he told Israel’s leaders that they would need to change the way they are fighting.

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“I underscored the imperative — for 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,”

“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,” he said. “That means taking more effective steps to protect the lives of civilians, including by clearly and precisely designating areas and places in southern and central Gaza where they can be safe and out of the line of fire.”

He also said Israel must avoid further mass displacement of Palestinians; avoid the targeting of “life-critical infrastructure like hospitals, like power stations, like water facilities”; and allow the eventual return of displaced Palestinians to northern Gaza. “There must be no enduring internal displacement,” he said.

Each of these points had been made by US officials speaking on condition of anonymity in recent weeks, but it appeared to be the first time they were stated on-the-record in the latest demonstration of the administration kicking up its pressure on Israel.

Faced with the knotty problem of defeating Hamas from the crowded Palestinian enclave where it is heavily entrenched, Israeli military planners have split the Strip in two, sending civilians south while concentrating its campaign in the north, with apparent plans to later move civilians north and repeat the process in southern Gaza.

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Senior Israeli military officers say the IDF’s tactics in northern Gaza involved encouraging noncombatants for weeks to evacuate, and then bombarding targeted areas heavily from the air, before ground forces moved through building by building. This left immense devastation, they acknowledge, but was necessary to address concerns that almost every building was booby-trapped and contained shafts leading to underground tunnels from which Hamas gunmen were emerging or poised to emerge.

The IDF has been considering more surgical use of ground forces in parts of southern Gaza, but also believes utilizing the northern Gaza approach when tackling Hamas strongholds in the south could be crucial in avoiding large-scale IDF casualties.

“The way Israel defends itself matters,” Blinken said at his press conference. Israel must act in accordance with “humanitarian law and the laws of war, even when confronting a terrorist group that respects neither.”

All of this can be done while enabling Israel to achieve its objectives, he asserted, though he acknowledged that the challenge is complicated because “Hamas intentionally embeds within civilians — within and below hospitals, schools, apartment buildings, refugee camps.”

Still, he argued, Israel’s sophisticated military “is capable of neutralizing the threat posed by Hamas, while minimizing harm to innocent men, women and children. And it has an obligation to do so.”

Blinken added that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the rest of the war cabinet agreed with the approach pushed by the US to avoid civilian casualties.

“Hamas could lay down its arms, surrender the leaders who are responsible for the slaughter, the torture, the rapes of October 7. Hamas could renounce its stated goal of eliminating Israel, killing Jews and repeating the atrocities of October 7, again and again and again.”veryone around the world who cares about protecting innocent lives, said Blinken, should be “demanding of Hamas that it immediately stop its murderous acts of terror and deplorable use of innocent men, women and children as human shields.”

### Doesn’t want ceasefire; does want truce extended

The trip to Israel was Blinken’s fourth since October 7, when war broke out following a Hamas attack in which 3,000 terrorists infiltrated southern Israeli communities, massacring 1,200 people — mostly civilians slaughtered in their homes and at a music festival — and taking some 240 hostages.

Aside from the war cabinet summit, Blinken also held separate meetings with Netanyahu, President Isaac Herzog, Gallant, war cabinet Minister Benny Gantz and Opposition Leader Yair Lapid.

The meetings came on the last day of a twice-extended week-long truce championed by Blinken to allow for the release of hostages and for humanitarian aid to get to more parts of the beleaguered enclave.

While the US does not back a permanent ceasefire, it has urged the breather to continue — to get more hostages out and more aid in.

Biden has come under significant pressure from the far-left flank of the Democratic Party and US allies in the Mideast and beyond to take a harder stance on Israel due to the high death toll in Gaza. The Hamas-run health ministry says over 15,000 have died, though those numbers cannot be verified, do not differentiate between civilians and combatants, and include Palestinians killed by errant rocket fire from within Gaza.

We continue to believe that Israel has a right and responsibility to go after Hamas. They have said very clearly that when these pauses are over, they intend to go back at it. As they make that decision, they’ll continue to find support from the United States in terms of the tools and capabilities, the weapons systems that they need as well as the advice and the perspectives that we can offer in terms of urban warfare,” White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said during a separate briefing on Thursday.

Kirby clarified that the US supports additional extensions to the ongoing humanitarian pause, with negotiations ongoing through Thursday for another extension. Like Blinken, he highlighted that the pause allows for the exit of hostages from the Strip and the entry of more aid into the enclave.

However, Kirby said the US does not back a permanent ceasefire, which Washington and Israel say would allow the threat posed by Hamas to remain.

In addition to sharpening his rhetoric regarding the need to protect civilians in Gaza, Blinken said he also discussed the need to plan for who will govern Gaza after the war.

The US is pushing for a “revitalized” Palestinian Authority to eventually govern a reunited Gaza and West Bank, though Netanyahu has all but rejected this proposal.

Blinken said Ramallah would have to undergo reforms, rid itself of corruption and promote a free press to be “revitalized.”

### The day after

During the war cabinet meeting, Blinken reportedly confronted Netanyahu to propose alternatives to PA rule rather than just dismissing what much of the international community believes is the only realistic option for a post-war Gaza.

The best way to kill an idea is to bring a better idea. The other countries in the region need to know what you are planning,” Blinken told Netanyahu in comments leaked to Channel 12.

There was a moment of silence in the room before Netanyahu responded, “As long as I’m sitting in this chair, the Palestinian Authority, which supports, educates and finances terror, will not rule Gaza the day after Hamas [is toppled].”

During his meeting with Netanyahu, Blinken again raised the need for Israel to take “immediate steps to hold settler extremists accountable for violence against Palestinians in the West Bank,” according to the US readout. Earlier this month, Biden threatened to issue visa bans against violent settlers whose attacks, rights groups say, have led roughly 1,000 Palestinians to flee their lands.

Blinken told reporters he raised Washington’s “deep concerns” about the uptick in extremist settler violence in addition to proposals from several hardline ministers to further expand settlements in the West Bank.

“I made clear our expectations about addressing these issues,” he said.

He called for steps towards “improving the lives of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank in immediate, tangible ways,” adding that they should be provided with a credible path toward statehood.

This is the same Hamas that carried out the terrible massacre on Oct. 7, the same Hamas that tries to murder us everywhere. I told him: We swore, and I swore, to eliminate Hamas. Nothing will stop us,” the statement read.

“We will continue this war until we achieve the three goals — to release all our hostages, to eliminate Hamas completely, and to ensure that Gaza will never again face such a threat,”

“would continue to insist on full accountability for those responsible” for violence against Palestinians, which has increased significantly since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, according to a State Department readout.

The pair discussed the “urgent need for measures to improve the security and freedom of Palestinians in the West Bank” during a meeting in Ramallah

Blinken also raised US efforts to accelerate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza.

According to the PA’s official Wafa news agency, Abbas emphasized the need to reach a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, spare civilians from bombardments and increase the flow of humanitarian aid into the Strip.

comprehensive file documenting Israeli occupation crimes in Gaza, and the West Bank, including Jerusalem,”This is what we can do that nobody else can do and this is us using all of our abilities,” he said. “We’ve geared the whole country toward this. If it doesn’t work, all hell will break loose.”

Israel says 240 people — Israelis, dual nationals and foreigners — were abducted by Hamas terrorists when they launched the deadliest attacks in Israel’s 75-year history on October 7, killing at least 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

An Israeli government official briefing reporters on Tuesday said the deal was expected to see the release of 50 living Israeli citizens — children, mothers and other women — in groups of 12-13 people over four days. In exchange, Israel has agreed to a truce for those four days, for the first time since the outbreak of the war, as well as the release of 150 teenage and female Palestinian security prisoners. The halt in fighting could be extended by one additional day for each additional group of 10 hostages freed, after which Israel’s campaign to destroy Hamas in Gaza is to resume.

Mossad chief David Barnea was in Doha on Wednesday to meet with Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani to discuss final details of the hostage deal slated to go into place Thursday morning. Al Thani is also the Qatari foreign minister.

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The West is increasingly using the influence of the small but gas-rich Gulf Arab state ruled by Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani in these situations, with the role of Qatar also crucial to the release in September of [five Americans](https://www.timesofisrael.com/five-us-prisoners-freed-from-iran-after-long-ordeal-in-exchange-for-frozen-funds/) held by Iran.

While Egypt has traditionally in recent years served as the main mediator between Israel and Palestinian groups, and Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also made no secret of its desire to be involved, the focus was on Qatar helping to return hostages safely.

### Pitfalls

Behind the scenes, Qatar was triangulating between Israel and Hamas and Qatari ambassadors had met with the families of hostages around the world, Ansari said.

“They know that there are children, there are women, there are families that are suffering every day, from the lack of information from the fact that they don’t know what is happening with their family members right now. So it’s a renewed sense of duty on us,”

Qatar has an advantage that the other candidates for negotiation do not have: It has housed the political leadership of Hamas” for the last decade, said Hasni Abidi, director of the Geneva-based Center for Studies and Research on the Arab World and the Mediterraneanconflict between Israel and Hamas, in Amman, Jordan, November 4, 2023. (Jonathan Ernst/ Pool Photo via AP)

The emirate of Qatar has further boosted its status as a specialist power in resolving delicate hostage situations by using its influence to help secure the release some of the hostages kidnapped by Palestinian terror group Hamas during its October 7 devastating assault on Israel.

Analysts say Qatar has honed a careful balancing act, allowing it to maintain warm relations with Western powers, while keeping ties with radical groups and states regarded as pariahs even by close allies.

Qatar’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Majed Al-Ansari told AFP that the breakthrough deal on Wednesday morning that will see a pause in hostilities underlined the country’s singular diplomatic position.

Tel Aviv Cafe brews resilience

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In retaliation, Israel launched a military campaign including a ground offensive in the Gaza Strip, aimed at toppling Hamas, which has ruled the Palestinian enclave since 2007.

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Qatar has hosted Hamas’s political office for more than 10 years, but is also home to the largest US military base in the region.

“Qatar has an advantage that the other candidates for negotiation do not have: It has housed the political leadership of Hamas” for the last decade, said Hasni Abidi, director of the Geneva-based Center for Studies and Research on the Arab World and the Mediterranean.

That is the only entity authorized to negotiate on behalf of Hamas and the Islamist movement’s armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, Abidi added.

Qatari money has helped Hamas pay the salaries of its civil servants, while the current emir’s father and predecessor Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani even visited Gaza in 2012.

But the position is not without potential pitfalls for the Gulf state. Two weeks into the conflict in Gaza, the US cautioned its ally that there could be “no more business as usual with Hamas.”

In 2017, Qatar’s neighbors, led by Saudi Arabia, imposed a three-year diplomatic and economic [blockade on the tiny emirate](https://www.timesofisrael.com/topic/qatar-crisis/), demanding it cut ties with Hamas and the Palestinian terrorists’ parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as downgrade ties with Iran.

### Taliban office

The first glimmer of hope for the release of the Gaza-held hostages came in October when US hostages Judith Tai Raanan and her daughter Natalie Shoshana Raanan [were released](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-releases-two-hostages-american-mother-and-daughter-judith-and-natalie-raanan/) and returned to Israel.

After that release, French President Emmanuel Macron hailed Qatar’s “very important role.” Two more Israelis were subsequently released. An Israeli soldier was also rescued by security forces.

World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder on Wednesday offered Doha the body’s “profound gratitude… for their significant role in facilitating the impending release.”

It was with Qatar that $6 billion of frozen Iranian funds from South Korean banks was parked pending the release in a hugely complex and sensitive swap deal of the five American citizens held by Iran.The emirate had invited the Taliban to open an office in Doha with the approval of the United States, making it possible to negotiate the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in 2021

Qatar also played a role in the release in 2013 of a Swiss teacher kidnapped in Yemen and in the release of hostages in Mali the same year.

Most recently, on October 16, while all eyes were on Gaza, Qatar announced that it had repatriated Ukrainian children, who had been abducted by Russia during the invasion.

In its work, Qatar has now largely overshadowed Egypt, which helped secure the 2011 release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit after he was held by Hamas for more than five years. Shalit was exchanged for over 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners held by Israel.

“It is precisely the accumulation of these successful mediations which has also made Qatar an essential interlocutor,”

These weren’t for use in the hospitals, but below them. That’s why they were smuggled among boxes of cookies,” “has not approved the entry of fuel into Gaza.”

### Israeli battle plans ‘significantly refined’

The senior Biden administration official also said Friday that Israel “significantly refined” its original military plan for its war against Hamas following talks with the US.

Pressed on whether Washington is having discussions with Israel about the growing numbers of civilian casualties, the senior official insisted that the US is “asking hard questions and constantly asking and ensuring there’s clarity about the objectives [they’re] seeking.”

“They have significantly refined what originally was their plan,” the official said in a phone briefing with reporters on condition of anonymity.

A ceasefire “depends on the Israelis feeling secure and ensuring something like this cannot happen again,” the official said.

A “pause,” on the other hand, would allow for safe passage of civilians and for more flow of aid into Gaza

looks to see that significantly ramped up over the coming over the coming days.”

The official also revealed that Israel agreed to a humanitarian pause on October 20 to secure [the release of two American hostages](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-releases-two-hostages-american-mother-and-daughter-judith-and-natalie-raanan/) from Hamas captivity.

The administration official explained that negotiators needed to receive assurances from Israel and Hamas that the hostages would be able to travel safely for what was “not a short distance” to reach the border from where they were being held in Gaza.

“There was a time period for that, and it went… like clockwork to get them out,” the official said in reference to what they refer to as a “trial humanitarian pause.”

The senior administration official said a much longer humanitarian pause will be required if a deal is struck to bring about the release of 240 hostages.

A “framework to get the hostages out of Gaza… is very much ongoing,”

“IDF forces will remain in control of the Strip, we will not give it to international forces,” Netanyahu said, according to a readout from his spokesperson, not saying whether it would do so for the short or long term.

Netanyahu and his government have been vague on what they envision for Gaza after the war. Only hours earlier the premier [told](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-isnt-seeking-to-displace-gazans-or-rule-enclave-netanyahu-reassures-us/) Fox News that Israel does not want to re-occupy or govern the Strip. Earlier this week, Netanyahu told ABC News that Israel will have “overall security responsibility” over the Gaza Strip “for an indefinite period” after the war against Hamas ends.

US officials have raised the possibility in recent weeks that an international force, possibly with troops from neighboring Arab allies, could manage security in the Strip for an interim period until it can be returned to a functioning Palestinian government, which Washington hopes will be the Palestinian Authority.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday [called on Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-opposes-reoccupation-of-gaza-after-netanyahu-talks-of-indefinite-control/) not to reoccupy the Strip once its war with Hamas ends.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas reiterated on Friday that the PA is ready to retake control of Gaza, but said that would only happen if the move is part of a comprehensive political solution that includes a Palestinian state established along the 1967 borders. The PA leader made the same [pledge](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/abbas-pa-will-take-responsibility-for-gaza-if-comprehensive-political-solution-reached/) on Sunday during a meeting in Ramallah with Blinken

He also repeated his allegations that Israel is carrying out “genocide” in Gaza as it battles Hamas there, and called for an international peace conference to provide “international guarantees” and a timetable to end Israeli control of the Palestinian territories.

The group meeting between Netanyahu and local leaders was his first since the October 7 attacks by Hamas terrorists, which saw some 1,400 people killed, most of them civilians, and over 240 abducted to Gaza.

The prime minister had come under fire for waiting over a month to meet the local leaders, criticism that intensified this week as he met settlement mayors before sitting down with the municipal heads of the area devastated by Hamas.

The mayors told Netanyahu they want a different security reality after the war is over and urged him not to agree to a ceasefire until all Gaza terrorists are eliminated, the statement from the premier’s spokesperson said. They also called for a robust government support program to support their communities as the fighting continues.

Netanyahu said in a statement: “There is a great determination by [the residents] and the government to restore things to an even better state than before. To rehabilitate, to build, to grow. And first of all to bring back security, to ensure there is no Hamas and that Hamas does not return, but also to ensure there is strong life [in the communities] afterward.”

“The State of Israel is the one that brought our great enemy upon us… The leadership brought us to this place.”

Netanyahu is the only senior Israeli official who has refused to make a full-throated admission of responsibility for the horrors of the Hamas attacks, and is likely to face growing calls to depart office once the war ends or abates.

“I think Israel will for an indefinite period have security responsibility,” Netanyahu told ABC News. “We’ve seen what happens when we don’t have that… security responsibility, what we have is the eruption of Hamas terror on a scale that we couldn’t imagine.”

 “Do you believe that you should take any responsibility?” And he replied: “Of course. It’s not a question,” adding that there would be time after the war “to allocate” that responsibility.I’ve said that there are going to be very tough questions that are going to be asked, and I’m going to be among the first to answer them,”

Pressed again on whether he should take any responsibility, Netanyahu answered: “Of course. That’s not a question. It’s going to be resolved after the war. I think there’ll be time to allocate that.”

As far as practical, little pauses — an hour here, an hour there — we’ve had them before. We’ll check the circumstances in order to enable humanitarian goods to come in or our hostages, individual hostages to leave,”“There would be a ceasefire for that purpose, and we’re waiting for that to happen,”

“We consider ourselves at the beginning of this conversation, not at the end of it, so you can expect that we’re going to continue to advocate for temporary localized pauses,”IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Monday ground forces were “deepening the pressure on Gaza City” after they managed to isolate and surround the northern part of the Strip.

He said the IDF killed several Hamas field commanders during [overnight airstrikes and operations](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-believes-it-caused-significant-damage-to-hamas-tunnels-in-overnight-strikes/), which “significantly harms Hamas’s ability to carry out counterattacks.”

On Hamas’s tunnel network, Hagari said combat engineering forces were demolishing every tunnel they come across using “different and diverse devices.”

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Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also touted the IDF’s operations in Gaza over the past day, calling them “very impressive.”

“The combination between the air force and ground forces shakes the Gaza Strip,” “some of them were the ones we eliminated a day or two ago and they were replaced by others, and they were also eliminated.”

Gallant said Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar “hides in his bunker and lets the field commanders die.”

(Israel Defense Forces)

Israeli forces on Monday pushed further into the Gaza Strip and were reportedly nearing the enclave’s main Shifa Hospital — which Jerusalem says is located above Hamas’s command center — as they continued to target Hamas’s underground tunnel network and military capabilities, after launching intensive strikes against the terror group the night before.

In a daily briefing, IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said ground forces were “deepening the pressure on Gaza City,” where Hamas’s main stronghold is believed to be, after they managed to isolate and surround the northern Strip.

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Massacre at Majdal Shams

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“The combination between the air force and ground forces shakes the Gaza Strip,”

Commenting on the Hamas field commanders that Israel has killed in airstrikes, Gallant said “some of them were the ones we eliminated a day or two ago and they were replaced by others, and they were also eliminated.”

Gallant said Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar “hides in his bunker and lets the field commanders die.” “Our commanders go at the front of the force, lead and achieve,”

” an apparent warning to Iran and its proxies.

“We are already a month into the war, hitting Hamas very, very hard, hitting the leadership of Hamas, hitting the commanders, hitting the terrorists, destroying Hamas’s infrastructure in Gaza, and we are also constantly ready for other areas,” Halevi told soldiers at the Nevatim airbase. “This [air] base knows how to reach anywhere in the Middle East.”

“We never did anything like this. With very heavy munitions, a very good connection between what the [ground] force needs and what the plane knows to give,” he said. “This connection of air and land together, we always knew it was strong, we see now that it is much stronger than we knew.“We never did anything like this. With very heavy munitions, a very good connection between what the [ground] force needs and what the plane knows to give,” he said. “This connection of air and land together, we always knew it was strong, we see now that it is much stronger than we knew. “The unfolding catastrophe makes the need for a humanitarian ceasefire more urgent with every passing hour,”“The parties to the conflict — and, indeed, the international community — face an immediate and fundamental responsibility: to stop this inhuman collective suffering and dramatically expand humanitarian aid to Gaza,”The nightmare in Gaza is more than a humanitarian crisis. It is a crisis of humanity,”Israel’s Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan said in response that Guterres has “rotten morals” for not persistently calling on Hamas to surrender and demanding the release of the at least 240 hostages held in the Gaza Strip.

By failing to do so, Guterres “has lost his moral compass and must not stay even for another minute in his position,”

“Any UN representative who makes the false moral comparison between a brutal terrorist organization that commits war crimes, and a law-abiding democracy, proves himself to have rotten morals and should immediately resign from his position,”“Shame on you,” he wrote, addressing Guterres. “More than 30 minors — among them a 9-month-old baby as well as toddlers and children who witnessed their parents being murdered in cold blood — are being held against their will in the Gaza Strip.”

“Hamas is the problem in Gaza, not Israel’s actions to eliminate this terrorist organization,”

“More journalists have reportedly been killed over a four-week period than in any conflict in at least three decades,” “Without fuel, newborn babies in incubators and patients on life support will die,“The way forward is clear. A humanitarian ceasefire — now. All parties respecting all their obligations under international humanitarian law,” “clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing.”

“Let me be clear: No party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law,”

Guterres did not name Israel. He [outraged Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-livid-after-un-chief-says-hamas-attacks-did-not-occur-in-vacuum/) on October 24 at a Security Council meeting where he alleged violations of humanitarian law and said that the Hamas attacks “did not occur in a vacuum,” leading Israeli officials to accuse the UN chief of justifying violence.

Guterres denied that was his intention and on Monday repeated his condemnation of “the abhorrent acts of terror perpetrated by Hamas,” and urged the Islamist terrorists to free hostages taken on October 7

“the deep concern” in Turkey “for the terrible toll” in Gaza.

“We are working, as I said, very aggressively on getting more humanitarian assistance into Gaza and we have very concrete ways of doing that,”

“I think we will see in the days ahead that the assistance can expand in significant ways,” he added, without providing details.

A Turkish diplomatic source said Fidan pressed Blinken for “an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.”

“Fidan also pointed out to his US counterpart Blinken that bombing civilian targets and destroying infrastructure in Gaza is unacceptable,”

### Tough talks

Blinken’s talks with Fidan would have been packed with problems even before Israel launched a relentless bombing and expanding ground campaign aimed at eradicating Hamas, after the terror group’s shock assault last month against Israel, in which Palestinian terrorists slaughtered over 1,400 people — the vast majority civilians, massacred amid brutal atrocities — and took over 240 hostages.

The Hamas-run health ministry said nearly 10,000 people — allegedly mostly civilians — had been killed in more than four weeks of war in Gaza. The figure cannot be verified independently and is believed to include both the terror group’s fighters and those killed by Palestinian rockets that misfired.

meeting at the foreign ministry in Ankara, on November 6, 2023. (Adem Altan/AFP)

ANKARA, Turkey — US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that Washington was working “very aggressively” to dramatically expand the amount of aid reaching trapped civilians in Gaza amid the Israel-Hamas war.

The top US diplomat held 2.5 hours of one-on-one talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan that were focused on soothing the anger at both Israel and the West by one of Washington’s most strategic but difficult allies.

NATO member Turkey has been an increasingly vocal critic of the way Israel has been pursuing its month-long offensive against Hamas terrorists who staged an October 7 onslaught in southern Israel — massacring 1,400 people in the deadliest attack in Israel’s history.

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Police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse hundreds of protesters who marched on an air base housing US forces in southeastern Turkey hours before Blinken’s arrival Sunday.

Hundreds more rallied outside the Turkish foreign ministry during his visit.

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself was traveling across Turkey’s remote northeast on Monday, in an apparent snub of Washington’s top diplomat.



Trucks carrying humanitarian aid enter the southern Gaza Strip from Egypt via the Rafah border crossing on November 2, 2023, as the war between Israel and the Palestinian terror group Hamas continues. (Mohammed Abed/AFP)

Blinken told reporters after the meeting that Washington was aware of “the deep concern” in Turkey “for the terrible toll” in Gaza.

“We are working, as I said, very aggressively on getting more humanitarian assistance into Gaza and we have very concrete ways of doing that,” Blinken said before boarding a plane for Japan.

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“I think we will see in the days ahead that the assistance can expand in significant ways,” he added, without providing details.

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“Fidan also pointed out to his US counterpart Blinken that bombing civilian targets and destroying infrastructure in Gaza is unacceptable,” the Turkish source said.

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Smoke billows following an Israeli strike in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on November 6, 2023, during the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinian terror group Hamas. (Said Khatib/AFP)

The war threatens to have broad repercussions on Washington’s relations with Turkey.

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Ankara has a muscular foreign policy and stakes in conflicts across the Middle East that occasionally fail to align with those of Washington or other NATO allies.

Washington is currently anxious to see Turkey’s parliament finally ratify Sweden’s stalled drive to join the US-led NATO defense organization.

The United States has also been tightening sanctions against Turkish individuals and companies that are deemed to be helping Russia evade sanctions and import goods for use in its war on Ukraine.

And Ankara is upset that the US Congress is holding up the approval of a deal backed by US President Joe Biden to modernize Turkey’s air force with dozens of US F-16 fighter jets.

Turkey also has longstanding reservations about US support for Kurdish forces in Syria who spearheaded the fight against Islamic State group jihadists but are viewed by Ankara as an offshoot of the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Ankara has stepped up airstrikes against armed Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq in reprisal for an October attack on the Turkish capital, claimed by the PKK, in which two assailants died.

Blinken called his talks in Ankara “very good, lengthy, and productive.”

But he provided few details about the outstanding dispute and highlighted Turkey’s “commitment” to accept Sweden into NATO.

Blinken faced a chorus of Arab calls to support an immediate ceasefire in Gaza during a whirlwind tour of the Middle East that saw him visit both Iraq and the West Bank on Sunday.

Israel says it could accept a humanitarian pause to allow in additional shipments of aid once Hamas frees the hostages.

Blinken said on Monday only that a “pause could help” secure more aid deliveries to Gaza.

Israeli officials railed at UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Tuesday after he appeared to suggest the impetus for the Hamas terror group’s devastating October 7 attack on Israel was the Jewish state’s continued control of Palestinian territories, with the Israeli Ambassador to the UN demanding that he resign.

“It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum,” Guterres said at a UN Security Council meeting on the Israel-Hamas war, which erupted when the terror group ravaged Israeli border communities, killing some 1,400 people, the vast majority of them civilians.

“The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing,” Guterres said.

Israel evacuated all settlements and military forces from the Gaza Strip under the 2005 Disengagement. It has maintained a tight blockade of the territory since Hamas took control in 2007, as has Egypt, with Jerusalem saying it must do so to limit the terror group’s ability to arm itself for attacks. In the West Bank, settlements have expanded under consecutive governments with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly arguing the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority is not a partner for peace, having rejected several offers in the past.

Guterres added that “the grievances of the Palestinian people cannot justify the appalling attacks by Hamas. And those appalling attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people,” an apparent reference to Israel’s ongoing campaign of airstrikes in the Gaza Strip that Hamas officials say has killed thousands

headquarters, October 24, 2023. (Seth Wenig/AP)

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Israel was outraged by Guterres’s comments. UN envoy Gilad Erdan called them “shocking,”and demanded that the secretary general resign. Foreign Minister Eli Cohen canceled a meeting with Guterres, and Minister Benny Gantz labeled the UN chief a “terror apologist.”

“The UN Secretary-General, who shows understanding for the campaign of mass murder of children, women, and the elderly, is not fit to lead the UN. I call on him to resign immediately,” Erdan posted on X. “There is no justification or point in talking to those who show compassion for the most terrible atrocities committed against the citizens of Israel and the Jewish people. There are simply no words.”

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“It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum,” Guterres said at a UN Security Council meeting on the Israel-Hamas war, which erupted when the terror group ravaged Israeli border communities, killing some 1,400 people, the vast majority of them civilians.

“The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing,”

Israel evacuated all settlements and military forces from the Gaza Strip under the 2005 Disengagement. It has maintained a tight blockade of the territory since Hamas took control in 2007, as has Egypt, with Jerusalem saying it must do so to limit the terror group’s ability to arm itself for attacks. In the West Bank, settlements have expanded under consecutive governments with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly arguing the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority is not a partner for peace, having rejected several offers in the past.

Guterres added that “the grievances of the Palestinian people cannot justify the appalling attacks by Hamas. And those appalling attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people,” an apparent reference to Israel’s ongoing campaign of airstrikes in the Gaza Strip that Hamas officials say has killed thousands.

Israel was outraged by Guterres’s comments. UN envoy Gilad Erdan called them “shocking,” and demanded that the secretary general resign. Foreign Minister Eli Cohen canceled a meeting with Guterres, and Minister Benny Gantz labeled the UN chief a “terror apologist.”

“The UN Secretary-General, who shows understanding for the campaign of mass murder of children, women, and the elderly, is not fit to lead the UN. I call on him to resign immediately,” Erdan posted on X. “There is no justification or point in talking to those who show compassion for the most terrible atrocities committed against the citizens of Israel and the Jewish people. There are simply no words.”

Erdan said the remarks were “horrible,” and “completely disconnected from the reality in our region.”

“It’s sad that a person with such views is the head of an organization that arose after the Holocaust,” he said. “It’s really unfathomable.”

Foreign Minister Cohen, who had traveled to New York to take part in the meetings on the war, posted to X (formerly Twitter) that he was canceling a planned meeting with Guterres. After what happened on October 7, he wrote, “there is no place for an even-handed approach. Hamas needs to be wiped off the face of the earth.”

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Gantz, who recently joined the government as a member of the narrow war cabinet overseeing the war effort, also had harsh words, posting to X: “Dark are the days when the United Nations Secretary-General condones terror.”

“Absolutely nothing can justify the slaughter of innocent civilians,” he wrote. “Now is the time to stand on the right side of history, or be judged by it. Terror apologists cannot speak on behalf of the world.”

On October 7, Hamas abruptly bombarded Israel with thousands of rockets while over 2,500 gunmen breached the border with the Gaza Strip. The terrorists rampaged murderously through southern areas slaughtering those they found, butchering entire families in some communities and also killing 260 at an outdoor music festival. Some victims were mutilated, raped, and tortured. Dozens of babies were killed. Before the IDF could counter the invasion, over 220 people of all ages were abducted and dragged back to Gaza as captives. Four have since been released.

Israel has responded to the Hamas assault by vowing to destroy the terror group and launching intensive strikes in Gaza, saying it is hitting terror targets while trying to avoid civilian casualties. It has told over one million Gaza residents to evacuate the northern part of the Strip ahead of an expected ground incursion.

The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry says the strikes have killed over 5,700 Palestinians so far. Those numbers cannot be independently verified and are believed to include Hamas’s own members, as well as civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rockets.

The Security Council session brought together top diplomats including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who has previously rejected calls for a ceasefire, saying it would only allow Hamas to regroup.

Guterres said he was “deeply concerned about the clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing in Gaza. Let me be clear: No party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law.”

“The relentless bombardment of Gaza by Israeli forces, the level of civilian casualties, and the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods continue to mount and are deeply alarming,” he said.

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Noting that he had previously “condemned unequivocally the horrifying and unprecedented… acts of terror by Hamas,” Guterres called for all the hostages to be treated humanely and “released immediately and without conditions.”

Along with its military campaign, Israel has also imposed a near-total blockade of Gaza, though some humanitarian aid has been permitted to enter from Egypt in recent days under a US-brokered deal.

“But [that] is a drop of aid in an ocean of need,” Guterres said and cautioned that if Gaza runs out of fuel it will be a “disaster.”

He warned the conflict “risks spiraling throughout the region” and appealed for “an immediate humanitarian ceasefire” while urging an eventual two-state solution that would see a Palestinian state created alongside Israel.

Cohen, the foreign minister, also attended the Security Council meeting, bringing with him family members of some of those held captive in Gaza.

Addressing the forum, he warned that if the UN does not back the drive to eradicate Hamas, it will face its “darkest hour” on Guterres’s watch.

Meanwhile, the UN on Tuesday called for improved coordination among humanitarian groups to make sure the small amount of aid now moving into the Strip contained only the most needed items.

An additional challenge in a very limited flow of supplies is that we are not really receiving the most needed supplies for Gaza, or the most relevant,” UNRWA spokeswoman Tamara Alrifai said.

“In one of the shipments over the last couple of days, we received boxes of rice and lentils,” she told journalists at the UN in Geneva via video link from the Jordanian capital Amman, where UNRWA has its headquarters.

“But for people to cook lentils and rice, they need water and gas. And therefore these kinds of supplies — while very generous and well-intended — are not very usable right now,” she said.

Alrifai added that before October 7, around 500 trucks a day were entering Gaza from Israel and Egypt, with a mixture of commercial goods, food, aid and fuel.

But only a few dozen trucks carrying food, medicine, and water have entered Gaza via the southern border with Egypt since a deal entered into effect on Saturday.

“We will need to get better as a consortium of humanitarians in sending very explicit lists of what is most needed,”

### Fuel concerns

The UN has warned that more hospitals and other vital services in the Palestinian territory risked shutting down without fuel deliveries.

Israel worries that Hamas would use fuel brought into Gaza to manufacture weapons and explosives. The IDF also [said Tuesday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-gaza-photos-show-half-million-liters-of-fuel-held-by-hamas/) that Hamas is holding at least half a million liters of fuel for its military purposes, withholding it from hospitals.

Alrifai said fuel crossings into Gaza could be logistically handled by UNRWA, which was obliged to report any misuse.

“When we at UNRWA receive fuel or any other equipment, we are accountable for its handling. A couple of close donors, close countries did raise the security question… we are obligated to report to them any misuse that we see, or any risk,” she said.

Alrifai said UNRWA had in place a “very sturdy diligence system to make sure that everything we receive is only used for humanitarian purposes.”

Israel has often accused UNRWA of failing to report Hamas misdeeds, essentially enabling the terror group to operate freely within Gaza’s civilian population.

### Medical aid

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) said it had been unable to distribute any life-saving health supplies from the truck convoys to major hospitals in northern Gaza, because of a lack of security guarantees.

It said the main Al-Shifa hospital in the north now had three patients for every two beds.

“In addition to the hospitals that have had to close due to damage and attacks, six hospitals across the Gaza Strip have already shut down due to lack of fuel,” the WHO said in a statement.

Medical supplies have been delivered to four hospitals in southern Gaza and medics “took boxes of supplies off the trucks and straight into operating theaters, where doctors have been performing surgeries without anesthesia or other basic surgical supplies,” the agency said.

As the United Nations promotes an awareness campaign ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25, chilling accounts from survivors and first responders who witnessed Hamas’s October 7 massacre of 1,200 Israelis paint a horrifying picture of systemic sexual assaults perpetrated against women and girls of all ages.

One survivor of the Supernova music festival, where about 360 people were slaughtered, described how she witnessed Hamas terrorists rape an Israeli girl: “As I am hiding, I see in the corner of my eye that [a terrorist] is raping her,” the witness recounted. “They bent her over and I realized they were raping her and simply passing her on to the next [terrorist].”

Yet many feminist and women’s rights organizations worldwide have remained conspicuously silent — and some are even questioning the veracity of the accusations. These denials of the sexual abuse perpetrated by Hamas have far-reaching consequences, including the deterrence of other sexual abuse victims from seeking help.

Among others, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN-Women) released a statement on October 13 equating the Hamas brutalities with Israel’s self-defense. Likewise, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) neglected to explicitly condemn Hamas’s atrocities. And the international #MeToo movement completely failed to mention Hamas — or the Israeli victims.

On Wednesday, Israeli women’s rights experts met with UN-Women for the first time to advocate for official recognition of Hamas crimes against women and children on October 7. It marked the first meeting that the United Nations mission dedicated to upholding the rights of women and children has held with Israeli advocates since the Hamas onslaught.

Following the meeting with Israelis, the UN Security Council met in New York on “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.” There, UN-Women executive director Sima Bahous said she was “alarmed by disturbing reports of gender-based and sexual violence.” In [her speech,](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2023/11/speech-now-more-than-ever-we-must-seek-peace) which focused on the plight of women in Gaza and in the Palestinian Authority, she also condemned Hamas’s crimes inside Israel and promised they would be investigated.But Bahous’s slim acknowledgment of reports of sexual abuse is unfortunately the exception, not the rule. In one high-profile case of sexual abuse denial, on November 18 [Samantha Pearson](https://www.timesofisrael.com/university-fires-head-of-sex-assault-center-who-signed-letter-denying-oct-7-rapes/), the former director of the University of Alberta’s sexual violence center, was fired for endorsing an open letter that denied Hamas terrorists had committed rape. The letter criticized Canada’s New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh for repeating “the unverified accusation that Palestinians were guilty of sexual violence.”

Orit Sulitzeanu, executive director of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, called the failure of groups to condemn Hamas’s abuses against women a betrayal.

“The very essence of gender equality and women empowerment groups worldwide is to assist victims of such atrocities. A pregnant woman was cut open and her unborn baby was shot. How could anyone stay silent when faced with such horrific acts?”

Referring to Pearson’s signing the open letter, Sulitzeanu added that “the denial of October 7 rapes by the head of the Rape Crisis Center at the University of Alberta is unbelievable.”

“Denying the horrific sexual assaults, gang rapes, the sadistic acts of abuse of children and women is simply incomprehensible,” Sulitzeanu said. “That Pearson chose to take a political stance against the fundamental principles of working with victims — to believe in what happened, understand the difficulty of coming forward and testifying, and acknowledge that the ability to speak up is a time-consuming process — is disheartening.”

On Wednesday, Israeli First Lady Michal Herzog published [an opinion piece in Newsweek](https://www.newsweek.com/silence-international-bodies-over-hamas-mass-rapes-betrayal-all-women-opinion-1845783) expressing outrage and betrayal over the international community’s failure to condemn the gender-based sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas on October 7.

“A Hamas video from a kibbutz shows terrorists torturing a pregnant woman and removing her fetus. Our forensic scientists have found bodies of women and girls raped with such violence that their pelvic bones were broken,”

Those of us unlucky enough to have seen video evidence broadcast by the terrorists themselves witnessed the body of a naked woman paraded through Gaza, and another, still alive, in bloodied pants held captive at gunpoint being pulled into a jeep by her hair. This evidence, along with the explicit recorded confessions of captured terrorists, makes abundantly clear that mass rape was a premeditated part of Hamas’s plan,”A large number of women and children are among the 240 hostages held by the Hamas terror group in the Gaza Strip, Herzog wrote, adding that “only when they are released will we know what they have endured.”

Herzog slammed international bodies for failing to speak out.

Collecting physical evidence of sexual assault has been difficult because the area in which the massacres took place remained an active war zone for days, and rape kits must be collected within a 48-hour window. In addition, many of the rape victims’ dead bodies were too badly disfigured to make the collection of physical evidence possible.

Despite these challenges, Israel Police is in the process of investigating and [building several sexual assault cases](https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-start-building-oct-7-rape-cases-focusing-on-footage-and-testimonies/) against Hamas terrorists with the intent of prosecuting them. Authorities confirmed they had retrieved video evidence, photographs of victims’ bodies and testimony from terrorists confirming witness accounts of sexual assault.

Israel recently [posted on its official X account](https://twitter.com/Israel/status/1723759157960953981) (formerly Twitter): “On Nov. 2, an Arabic-Hebrew transliteration glossary belonging to Hamas was discovered in Israel with sexual terminology, including ‘take your pants off.’ This evidence suggests that Hamas terrorists planned to systematically rape Israeli women.”

### A deliberate choice not to stand with Israeli women

The UN-Women’s [campaign](https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/1724759213287563733) for November 25 urges governments worldwide to share how they are acting to end gender-based violence. But that organization’s October 13 statement didn’t name Hamas or its crimes against humanity, and read simply: “UN-Women condemns the attacks on civilians in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

Until Wednesday, Bahous — previously a Jordanian diplomat before becoming UN-Women’s executive director — similarly made no mention of the massacre or targeting of Israeli women, including in an October 8 [tweet](https://twitter.com/unwomenchief/status/1710833472095269002), but had repeatedly attacked Israel for its campaign to remove Hamas from power, including with a November 3 [tweet](https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/1720206701654065328) reading: “We condemn the strikes on #Jabalia refugee camp, all refugee camps and civilian infrastructure. The continuous bombardment has caused devastating destruction and loss of lives, leaving nowhere safe for the people of #Gaza, including women & children.”

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also failed to explicitly condemn Hamas’s atrocities, despite having previously denounced Islamic State’s systematic attacks and sexual violence against Yazidi women in Iraq, Boko Haram’s violence against Nigerian women and the targeting of Rohingya women and girls in Myanmar.

When contacted by The Times of Israel, CEDAW confirmed that it “did not as such adopt a statement on the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023.”

But while CEDAW didn’t have a statement condemning the Hamas rapes, it did have a list of obligations for Israel’s continued participation in the CEDAW Convention — including that it come up with a comprehensive strategy to deal with those rapes.

Countries that have ratified the CEDAW Convention are required to submit a report every four years on progress made in removing obstacles to equality. This year, Israel is required to submit one of these reports, its seventh since ratifying the Convention.

Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, a former vice president of CEDAW, told The Times of Israel that she submitted a request to the group to add as an item for discussion Hamas’s massacre during an already scheduled meeting on October 9.

CEDAW ignored the request for three weeks before releasing a statement in which the committee condemned “the escalating violence in the Middle East that has killed thousands of civilians, including women and children.”

Said Halperin-Kaddari: “CEDAW is the most important women’s rights international body that signals the direction in which women’s rights should be developed. It sets standards for the whole world in terms of international women’s rights.

“It doesn’t matter that Hamas is a non-state actor, it is obligated to abide by international human rights law.

“ Regardless, CEDAW has condemned non-state actors in the past,” she said.

### The #MeToo movement turns its back on Israelis

When initially asked by The Times of Israel about the group’s position on the October 7 atrocities, a development associate with the #MeToo movement said a statement would be forthcoming.

The statement, released November 13, makes no mention of Israel, Israeli women or Hamas.

“What we have been witnessing in Gaza is a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of people have been killed, injured, displaced, or deprived of basic human necessities like water, food, and medical care,” reads the statement.

It continues: “As a global movement rooted in Black feminism, and driven by principles of anti-violence and anti-patriarchy, me too. International recognizes that sexual violence often functions as a weapon of war and imperialism. Sexual violence has been used in many periods of war, as a tactic to intimidate and punish innocent civilians, and as a tool of genocide and ethnic cleansing, aimed at destroying communities. Conflict-related sexual violence is acknowledged as a war crime under international law but accountability and justice for survivors under the law remains difficult to enforce.”

The group issued [a follow-up statement](https://metoomvmt.org/stay-informed/press/me-too-international-calls-for-a-ceasefire/) on November 15 clarifying that it stands by Israeli women, as well.

Other NGOs have similarly singled Israel out for censure or avoided condemning Hamas’s war crimes.

Women Deliver, a global group advocating for gender equality and women’s rights, also failed to condemn the October 7 massacre, but [tweeted](https://twitter.com/MalihaKhanWD/status/1716924127955845587) about “the risk of genocide against the Palestinian people” and issued a single statement “condemning the ongoing war crimes in Gaza.”

Additionally, the group Equality Now refrained from mentioning Hamas by name, referring The Times of Israel to an October 23 statement in which the organization expressed a commitment to “identify violations of international and humanitarian law, drawing attention to the specific impact on all women and children,” and to provide “recommendations for action to governments and international human rights bodies to hold perpetrators of violence to account.”

The organization was not able to expand on how or when it planned to spearhead such an effort in relation to Hamas’s attacks.

Meanwhile, Time’s Up, which supports and promotes awareness of victims of sexual harassment, did not respond to repeated requests for comment, and SOS Children’s Villages, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt’s foundation, which supports families and children affected by conflicts, referred The Times of Israel to four statements on the Israel-Hamas war.

Three of them focused on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and called for an immediate ceasefire, whereas the other called for the “immediate protection of children and their rights in the Gaza Strip and Israel,” without making mention of Hamas’s crimes.

### Breaking the silence

Some groups have bucked the trend that appears to be dominating human rights organizations.

Belkis Wille, an associate director with the Crisis and Conflict division at Human Rights Watch, said the group sent a team to Israel to conduct an in-depth investigation into sexual crimes and abuses by Hamas terrorists on October 7.

“My colleague and I arrived a few days after the [Hamas] attacks. We’ve spoken to dozens of witnesses and survivors and are analyzing hundreds of videos and photos of the events,” said Wille, who took part in the field investigation.

Wille told The Times of Israel that it would take several weeks for the report to be compiled and published, and even longer to conduct an internal review and analysis of photo and video evidence. Investigators are also planning to use forensics to match evidence to testimonies. European Parliament President Roberta Metsola also condemned the attacks at the European Council, saying that on October 7, “the world awoke to the worst terrorist attack on families in Israel in generations.”

Hamas’s “mass murder, kidnappings, rapes, torture, mutilations and desecration of the dead” cannot be ignored, she added.

Metsola spokesperson Jüri Laas told The Times of Israel that “the president wanted EU institutions and all political groups to express our solidarity following the very disturbing events. She wanted to show our strong and united stand against terrorism.”

And in response to the international #MeToo movement’s failure to condemn the sexual abuse perpetrated by Hamas, the grassroots awareness campaign #MeToo\_UNless\_UR\_a\_Jew was created by Danielle Ofek, co-founder and CEO of P51, a social impact venture that advocates for equal opportunities for women in the workplace, and Nataly Livski, senior marketing and business development marketer at Deloitte.

The website and corresponding Instagram account include a petition to denounce UN-Women’s repeated failure “to address the current situation impartially while actively and knowingly working to create a false and insidious narrative.”

### Far-reaching consequences

Sulitzeanu said that she knew of October 7 survivors who were raped but were not yet ready to talk. If the outside world remained silent, she said, these victims would be less likely to do so and therefore continue suffering alone.

Sulitzeanu also invoked Shani Louk, whose lifeless and naked body was paraded around and desecrated in the streets of Gaza, as well as other young women who were raped and mutilated.

“There was a desire to shame the nation and contaminate Israeli women,” she said.

Dr. Cochav Elkayam, chair of the Civil Commission on the October 7 Crimes by Hamas Against Women and Children, described a harrowing incident in which “two teenage girls shot in the head were found with their pants pulled down, vaginal bleeding and sperm specimen all over them.”

Elkayam, an international law expert who founded Reichman University’s Dvora Institute for Gender and Sustainability, also related the testimony of a 94-year-old who witnessed her granddaughter being sexually abused and then brutally killed.

Maytal Kuperard, the spokesperson for Jewish Women’s Aid, a UK-based group that supports Jewish women and children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence, told The Times of Israel that victims have been deterred from seeking help.

“The public silence from many UK domestic/sexual abuse sector organisations further impacts the isolation and the fear our clients are experiencing,” read an October 25 statement from the group. Kuperard added that since October 7, women in abusive relationships in the UK were choosing to stay in their toxic environments.

To combat this, Tal Hochman,  government relations officer at the Israel Women’s Network, which promotes gender equality in Israel, started a petition supported by over 140 organizations demanding condemnation by all UN bodies of the crimes committed against women on October 7.

Hochman told The Times of Israel that UN organizations’ inertia could encourage Hamas to perpetrate further sexual crimes against the roughly 240 hostages being held in Gaza.

“UN Resolution 1325 specifies that women and children should receive special protection in times of conflict or in captivity. We need our feminist and human rights allies to condemn those crimes and push for the release of women and children held in Gaza,” said Hochman.

She explained that clear condemnation might have prompted the UN to send task forces to Israel to help document the gender-based violence, collect evidence and help treat the victims.

Elkayam, of the Civil Commission gathering evidence of Hamas’s sexual abuse, reiterated the betrayal she says all women felt from UN bodies’ failure to condemn Hamas’s crimes against women and young girls.

“Their silence is deafening,” Elyakam said. “History will judge their inability to express solidarity with victims of these despicable crimes in a country that suffered its worst attack since the Holocaust.”

Israel formally declared a state of war on Sunday as the death toll from an unprecedented Hamas attack a day earlier rose above 700 and was expected to rise further, with the fate of over a hundred people abducted and taken to the Gaza Strip still unclear. On Monday afternoon, the toll was updated to 800.

The Government Press Office, a body that operates under the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, said that the number of hostages in Gaza was at over 100. Hamas and Islamic Jihad boasted Sunday night that they were holding some 130 Israeli hostages, claiming this included high-ranking army officials.

Israeli jets carried out “intense” airstrikes on targets in Gaza on Sunday afternoon, shortly after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office announced that the security cabinet had voted Saturday evening to put the country officially at war, meaning it can carry out “significant military activities.”

Battles were ongoing Sunday in at least three communities near the Gaza border overrun by Hamas gunmen a day earlier, and rocket fire continued to dog Israeli communities, as Israel girded for what was expected to be a prolonged campaign against the Gaza-based terror group.

In an assault of shocking breadth, Hamas gunmen rolled into as many as 22 locations in southern Israel on Saturday morning, including towns and smaller communities as far as 15 miles (24 kilometers) from the Gaza border. In some places, they roamed for hours, gunning down civilians and soldiers as Israel’s military scrambled to muster a response. At the same time, thousands of rockets were fired at towns in the south and center.

The scenes of chaos and suffering and the prolonged failure to gain control of the situation have shocked and outraged the nation, and sparked demands for answers on the many failures of intelligence, deployment, and policy that had enabled such a national catastrophe, with hundreds of terrorists flooding civilian communities in armed convoys.

Officials estimated Sunday that over 700 people were killed in the massive assault launched by Hamas terrorists in Israeli communities near Gaza and by the thousands of rockets fired into Israel, making it the bloodiest day in the nation’s history, according to reports.

A spokesperson for ZAKA, a volunteer group that handles human remains after terror attacks and other disasters, told Hebrew media that the death toll rose sharply, as Israeli teams managed to clear Hamas gunmen out of communities along the border and recover victims.

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Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer told CNN in an interview Sunday that the death toll was “well north of 600 people,” adding: “There will probably be more hundreds, several hundred more.”

The Health Ministry said that the number of wounded in hospitals had reached 2,243, including 22 in critical condition and 343 seriously wounded.

The liberation of communities and other areas from Hamas control revealed shocking scenes of streets, fields and highways littered with bodies, abandoned vehicles and personal belongings, with many people having been slain in their own homes.

Reut Karp shared on Facebook an alarming testimony from her children about the murder of their father, Dvir Karp, and his partner Stav in Kibbutz Re’im.

“At 8:20 a.m., terrorists entered Dvir’s home, he lunged at them with an axe, tried to protect my two kids who were with him, and was murdered in front of their eyes,” she posted. “His partner Stav also tried to protect them, but was murdered as well. The terrorist calmed down my Daria and Lavi, covered them in a blanket, took lipstick and wrote on the wall: ‘The al-Qassam [Brigades] people don’t murder children.’

“For three hours, I was on the phone with Daria, calming her down, hearing her breathe heavily and in fear. She was hearing someone still inside the house and I instructed her to be silent,” said Reut Karp, who lives in Yehud. Eventually, she said, an armed civilian found and rescued the kids through the window — to avoid passing by the bodies — and took them to a safe home where they were still besieged and unable to leave the kibbutz as of Sunday.

Mor Bayder shared the story of the brutal murder of her grandmother in Kibbutz Nir Oz.

“My grandmother, my whole world, who lit up my life, a rock to me and my family, a resident of Nir Oz all her life, was viciously murdered yesterday by a terrorist in her home,” Bayder wrote on Facebook. “At 7 a.m., I saw the nightmare of my life. A terrorist broke into her home, murdered her, took her phone, photographed the horror, and posted it on her Facebook account. That’s how we found out.”

In some cases, the Hamas terrorists set buildings on fire in Nir Oz to flush out families from their hideouts, then proceeding to shoot or kidnap them.

In addition to those killed and injured, Hamas gunmen took an unknown number of civilians and soldiers captive into Gaza after overrunning several military bases and communities.

Social media was filled with horrifying videos of men, women and children being carried into the Strip, many of them appearing to have been abused. There were also videos published of dead Israelis taken, including soldiers, the bodies of some of whom were paraded in the streets.

The Israel Defense Forces said Sunday it had established a situation room to focus on putting together accurate information regarding the Israeli hostages held by the Hamas terror group in the Gaza Strip.

The IDF said the team will compile a “situational picture” for locating the captives, both soldiers and civilians.

“Amid all the complexity and uncertainty, it is necessary to issue reliable messages as quickly as possible. Some families have already received messages about their loved ones,” the IDF said.

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Police and the IDF Home Front Command have also established a situation room to identify those killed in the attacks using DNA samples provided by families.

A long line of Israelis with missing relatives snaked outside a police station in central Israel to supply investigators with DNA samples and other means that could help identify their family members.

Writing on X, Opposition Chief Yair Lapid called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to immediately appoint a coordinator for missing and captive Israelis “so that there will be someone to work with the families.”

Shortly after, Netanyahu appointed Gal Hirsch, a reservist brigadier-general who commanded the 91st Division in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, as the government’s point man on missing and kidnapped citizens.

Among the kidnapped were small children, the elderly, and foreign nationals including 11 Thais working on farms near the border. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the State Department was attempting to confirm reports that Americans had been killed or kidnapped.

In Israel, a woman posted a heartfelt plea on social media with a photograph of her 85-year-old grandmother in the hands of Hamas terrorists in Gaza

“This is my grandmother, she was captured and taken to Gaza,” wrote Adva Adar on social media. “Her name is Yaffa Adar and she is 85!!”“My grandmother established the kibbutz with her own hands, believed in Zionism, in this country that has abandoned her, a hostage,” she wrote. “She is apparently thrown somewhere, suffering from severe pain, without medication, without food and without water, dying of fear, alone.

“And no one is talking to us, no one can tell us anything.”

The call echoed the [pleas from the families of those missing](https://www.timesofisrael.com/relatives-of-dozens-killed-or-kidnapped-to-gaza-from-rave-nobody-is-helping-us/), many of whom say they have been [abandoned](https://www.timesofisrael.com/residents-near-gaza-strip-beg-for-idf-help-as-they-fight-off-terrorists/) by the authorities.

Desperate mother Alin Atias was looking for her daughter Amit Buskila.

“Nobody is helping us,” she said. “Where is the government?”

“I beg the whole country. Help me find my daughter,” she cried. “Benjamin Netanyahu, I am begging you, send helicopters. Find her, I beg you, please.”

Ella Ben Ami said that she believes her father has been kidnapped into Gaza after seeing a photo of him on social media being taken, and has no idea where her mother is.

“We just keep watching the news all day hoping for news,” she said. “It’s horrible, it’s a horrible thought, that we are only finding out information from the news.”

An Egyptian official said Israel had sought help from Cairo to ensure the safety of the hostages, and that Egypt’s intelligence chief had contacted Hamas and the smaller but more radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad group, which also took part in the incursion, to seek information. Egypt has often mediated between the two sides in the past.

However, both Israel and Hamas denied that talks over the hostages were taking place.

“Right now, we are fighting terrorists on Israeli territory. We’re not involved in any talks about the hostages right now,” There were still Hamas terrorists in Israel, and Israeli troops were working to find them and kill them, he said.

“We will purify the area and attack terrorists wherever they are,” he said. “Hamas has inflicted a great disaster on the residents of the Gaza Strip. There will be a time for hard questions and tough investigation, but now we are at war and are busy attacking the enemy and winning.”

The existence of Israeli hostages in Gaza likely complicated Israeli plans for a widescale counterassault on Gaza. Nonetheless, Israeli jets pounded Hamas and Islamic Jihad positions throughout the Strip, intensifying its air campaign a day after Netanyahu vowed to “avenge this black day.”

Sites targeted by Israeli Air Force fighter jets and drones included headquarters used by the terror groups to manage the fighting.

The Israeli Navy also foiled attempts by terrorists to infiltrate into Israel via the sea, killing dozens of terrorists.

The Hamas-run health ministry in the Gaza Strip said 370 Palestinians have been killed and another 2,200 have been wounded in the Gaza Strip. Most of those were apparently killed in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israel’s retaliatory strikes.

The IDF has said that it has killed more than 400 Palestinian terrorists, both in Israel and in strikes in Gaza.

But inside Israel, security forces were still struggling to clear terrorist cells entrenched within devastated communities over 36 hours after the coordinated assault began. There were reports of heavy gun battles between Israeli troops and Palestinian terrorists in the southern town of Magen, close to the border with the Gaza Strip.

According to Hebrew-language media, the Israel Defense Forces also used tanks against the terrorists in the area.

Additionally, gunfights were continuing in Kfar Aza, where there were reports of at least 10 terrorists still holed up.

The military said it was evacuating civilians from towns adjacent to the border with the Gaza Strip, while searching the area for any terrorists who may still be in Israeli territory.

The towns include Nahal Oz, Erez, Nir Am, Mefalsim, Kfar Aza, Gevim, Or Haner, Ibim, Netiv Ha’asara, Yad Mordechai, Karmia, Zikim, Kerem Shalom, Kissufim, Holit, Sufa, Nirim, Nir Oz, Ein Hashlosha, Nir Yitzhak, Be’eri, Magen, Re’im, Sa’ad, and Alumim.

“Further evacuations will be carried out according to the assessment of the situation,” the IDF said.

Many civilians were still holed up in their homes, hiding in fear of roving terrorists searching for victims.

All known hostage situations, which saw Israeli civilians held captive by Hamas gunmen in their towns, were resolved overnight, with army and police forces killing terrorists and rescuing their captives after hours-long standoffs in Sderot, Ofakim, and [Kibbutz Be’eri](https://www.timesofisrael.com/kibbutz-beeri-bloodbath-reminds-israelis-of-fears-and-fortitudes-from-1948/).

But fears that terrorists could still be roaming free throughout the country remained rampant, keeping much of the country on edge.

Police said they “neutralized” a car with Palestinian terrorists on the Route 4 highway as it sped northward from Gaza, before veering off into a field close to Ashkelon. But later reports indicated that the driver had been an Israeli and the chase a tragic case of mistaken identity.

In Sderot, where terrorists managed to overrun a police station Saturday, a resident riding an all-terrain vehicle was shot and wounded by Israeli forces after refusing to halt, the municipality said.

Additionally, there was sporadic rocket fire throughout the day, mainly toward communities in the south, in contrast to barrages a day earlier, which targeted areas as far away as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Four people were wounded, one of them critically, in a rocket barrage toward the Sderot area. The municipality said at least six buildings were hit, while the Sdot Negev Regional Council ordered residents to remain in shelters until further notice.

On Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, the Hezbollah terror group shelled Israeli positions, drawing Israeli counterstrikes and sparking worries of a second front opening in the war.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant ordered the IDF’s Home Front Command to put together plans for a possible evacuation of towns on Israel’s northern border as well, should fighting break out on that front too.

The military was engaged in a mass call-up of reserves soldiers amid preparations for what leaders promised would be an unprecedented military response, with many forces diverted toward the south and also in the north.

Israel was receiving broad support from Western governments and leaders, many of whom condemned the Hamas assault and the targeting and systematic abduction of civilians.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators on Sunday in New York celebrated Hamas’s massive deadly terror attack against Israel, as supporters of the Jewish state held rallies to mourn and express outrage over the slaughter.

Several hundred pro-Palestinian demonstrators rallied in Times Square, waving Palestinian flags and chanting “Resistance is justified,” “Globalize the intifada,” and “Smash the settler Zionist state.”

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,”

* [1](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [2](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [3](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [4](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [**5**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [6](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [7](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)
* [8](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-palestinians-celebrate-hamas-attack-as-israel-supporters-rally-in-new-york/)

NEW YORK — Pro-Palestinian demonstrators on Sunday in New York celebrated Hamas’s massive deadly terror attack against Israel, as supporters of the Jewish state held rallies to mourn and express outrage over the slaughter.

Several hundred pro-Palestinian demonstrators rallied in Times Square, waving Palestinian flags and chanting “Resistance is justified,” “Globalize the intifada,” and “Smash the settler Zionist state.”

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,”  Several dozen pro-Israel demonstrators, including many Israelis, gathered across the street. They sang Israel’s anthem, “Hatikvah,” bearing Israeli flags, and chanted “Shame” and “Murderers.”

Tensions ran high, with the Israeli group chanting “The people of Israel live” in Hebrew, and the pro-Palestinian group shouting back “free Palestine.” Some made mock crying gestures toward the Israelis to taunt them. The whole world should know there was a massacre in Israel. That’s why I’m here,” said Israeli demonstrator Tanya Farhi-Altman.

“In their place, I would be very ashamed to show my face here today, after yesterday they murdered so many of our children, the elderly, women and helpless people,” she said of the pro-Palestinian activists. “I would be ashamed and stay home. I would also say ‘I’m sorry.'”

This is not a protest, this is a vigil,” said Israel supporter Hannah Simpson. “We’re in a state of mourning, shock, panic and outright fear for the days ahead that are going to get bloodier.”

“We mourn the death of our own and the death of the Palestinians who are going to be collateral damage in what it takes to eliminate this threat to Israel’s sovereignty and security,” she said.

At a second rally across from the UN Headquarters, several hundred Israelis and US Jews gathered for a somber event to mourn and express solidarity.

The crowd sang “Hatikvah” and traditional songs, and chanted “Never again” and “No fear here.” Some in the crowd cried; others carried photos of terror victims.

“It’s heartbreaking, it’s horrifying, but also now Israelis of all different backgrounds, regardless of any differences in opinions or about anything, are obviously coming together as Israelis and Jews always do in times of crisis,” Michael Perlman said. “I think people feel good to be together during this time, that’s really important, and to know that we have each other here in America and we have the back of Israel.”

The pro-Palestinian demonstrators from Times Square marched across Manhattan to a street corner near the Israeli group, and the two sides squared off on opposite sides of a two-lane street. Hundreds of police and metal barricades separated the groups as helicopters and a drone hovered overhead.

New York protests during previous rounds of Gaza violence saw some fighting between the opposing sides, and violent [hate crimes](https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-plead-guilty-to-hate-crime-charges-for-2021-attack-on-jewish-man-in-nyc/) against Jews. Jewish security officials and the state leadership have said there are no known threats to Jewish communities, but police have stepped up protection of Jewish sites.

Among the pro-Palestinian side, the mood was celebratory and spiteful. Demonstrators chanted “700,” apparently referring to the confirmed number of Israeli fatalities in the attack so far, and held up the number seven on their hands while making throat-slitting gestures. Others flashed victory signs with their hands while shouting insults.

One man held up a picture of an Israeli hostage on his phone and waved it at the Israeli crowd. Another was seen brandishing [an image of a swastika](https://twitter.com/IsraelinNewYork/status/1711140059162849570). Some taunted the Israelis while tearing up and stomping on an Israeli flag, or danced with a Palestinian flag.

“The oppressed people of Palestine broke out of the open-air prison,” one speaker told the crowd, to cheers. “The White House is telling all of its mouthpieces to tell us a false story, but we know that the real terrorist is the Israeli state.”

The Israeli crowd chanted “Terrorists,” “Murderers,” “Shame on you,” and “Bring them home,” referring to the dozens of hostages taken by the Gaza terrorists.

The pro-Palestinian rally was organized by activist groups that call for Israel’s destruction and the ostracization of Zionists at regular [street protests](https://www.timesofisrael.com/intifada-until-victory-pro-palestinian-demonstrators-rally-in-new-york/) in the city. Some of the groups are affiliated with student organizations at the City University of New York (CUNY), the city’s massive public university system that Jewish groups have accused of [allowing campus antisemitism](https://www.timesofisrael.com/nycs-public-law-school-releases-video-of-antisemitic-commencement-speech/). Several CUNY student groups backed Sunday’s pro-Palestinian rally, and another scheduled for Monday at the Israeli consulate.

CUNY’s chancellor [said](https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2023/10/07/statement-from-cuny-chancellor-felix-v-matos-rodriguez/) on Saturday that he was “horrified by Hamas’ surprise attack on Israel and its people.”

The pro-Palestinian protest drew harsh criticism from Jewish groups and the state leadership. Governor Kathy Hochul called it “abhorrent and morally repugnant”; Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine said it was “outrageous”; and US Rep. Ritchie Torres of New York said it was “glorifying terrorism.”

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The American Jewish Committee said, “Anyone supporting Hamas’s assault on Israel is supporting their war crimes, slaughter, and kidnapping.”

“These protestors openly cheer for atrocities. They’re not pro-Palestinian; they’re pro-bloodshed,” the Israeli Consulate in New York said.

US Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York said, “I can’t think of anything more ill-timed and cold-hearted than today’s demonstration in Times Square.”

The protest was also supported by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) political party. The New York branch of the party advertised the event and expressed “solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right to resist.” In response to criticism, the national chapter of DSA doubled down, saying the Hamas attack was “not unprovoked,” adding, “Take to the streets to join a protest.”

Why does [DSA] support Hamas when it murders Israeli civilians? Why do people only excuse terror when it targets Israel?” the American Jewish Committee said.

“The NYC-DSA is revealing itself for what it truly is — a deep rot of antisemitism that must be universally condemned for celebrating the deadly terrorist attacks against Israel,” Torres said.

Members of the US Congress affiliated with the party, some of whom have condemned the Hamas attack, did not respond to requests for comment on Sunday.

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In Atlanta, more than 75 people demonstrated at the Israeli consulate Sunday afternoon, chanting slogans in support of Hamas and calling for an end to US aid to Israel.

“Yesterday was inevitable,” said Anne Belocura, a member of the Party for Socialism and Liberation. She said that the policies of Israel “precipitated an inevitable counteroffensive by Palestinian resistance forces.”

Talia Segal, a student at nearby Georgia Tech, came as a counter-protester, carrying an Israeli flag fringed with the rainbow of the LGBTQ+ pride movement.

“Terrorism is never justified. Their target was Israeli civilians,” said Segal, who is Jewish and said she fears for her family in Israel.

In Chicago, Priscilla Reed was among hundreds of pro-Palestinian demonstrators who rallied outside the Israeli consulate. Many waved Palestinian flags or wore keffiyeh, the black and white checkered scarfs that have come to symbolize Palestinian solidarity. Their chants, in both English and Arabic, included, “Netanyahu you will see, Palestine will be free!”

Reed, a retired teacher, said the attacks by Hamas were in response to Israel’s “systemic daily violence against Palestinians.”

Other pro-Palestinian rallies, many lauding “the resistance,” were set to take place around the US and in other countries over the weekend and in the coming days.

Jewish groups have also scheduled solidarity events and efforts to assist Israel, and Israelis in the US.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel “is at war” after Hamas launched a devastating [surprise attack](https://www.timesofisrael.com/incoming-rocket-sirens-sound-across-southern-central-israel/) on the country on Saturday, and vowed to exact an “unprecedented price” from the terror group.

“Citizens of Israel, we are at war. Not an operation, not a round [of fighting,] at war! This morning Hamas initiated a murderous surprise attack against the state of Israel and its citizens,” Netanyahu said in his filmed statement in Hebrew.

The statement, which appeared to have been filmed at the Israel Defense Forces headquarters in Tel Aviv, was posted at around 11 a.m., several hours into the fighting that erupted after Hamas fired thousands of rockets into Israel and hundreds of gunmen crossed the border with the Gaza Strip and invaded multiple Israeli towns and communities.

At least 200 Israelis were confirmed killed and over 1,400 wounded by evening. Additional casualties were reported from the Gaza border communities, where gun battles still raged between the IDF and terrorists who were seen roaming freely in several places.

“We have been in this since the early morning hours. I have convened the heads of the defense establishment. I’ve given directives, first and foremost, to clear the [affected] urban areas of the terrorists who penetrated them,” Netanyahu said. “This is happening right now.”

In parallel, I am initiating an extensive mobilization of the reserves to fight back on a scale and intensity that the enemy has so far not experienced. The enemy will pay an unprecedented price,I urge the public to follow strictly the directives of the military, the Home Front Command. We are at war and will win,” Netanyahu said.

Throughout Saturday, the IDF said it struck multiple terrorist squads in southern Israel, as well as several sites belonging to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The sites targeted by Israeli Air Force fighter jets and drones included 17 military compounds, four headquarters, and two high-rise towers the IDF said were used to house Hamas assets.

The military said it notified residents of the two buildings before they were hit.

IAF fighter jets dropped more than 16 tons of munitions on Hamas assets in the Strip, according to a military source.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also vowed that Israel “will win this war.”

“Hamas made a grave mistake this morning and started a war against the State of Israel. IDF soldiers are fighting the enemy at all the infiltration sites,” Gallant said in remarks provided by his office.

“The State of Israel will win this war,” he added.

“It is necessary to mobilize the international community against terrorism,” the statement continued, ending with strong support for the citizens of Israel, active and reserve IDF soldiers all security and emergency forces.

“We call on all citizens — obey the directives of the Home Front Command, take care of yourselves and together we will overcome terrorism,” said the statement.

Organizers of protests against the government’s judicial overhaul scheduled for Saturday night announced the cancellation of the weekly demonstrations.

“We stand with the residents of Israel and give full support to the IDF and the security forces,” the protest organizers said in a statement.

“We call on all those who are needed to report [for duty] and play their part to safeguard the security and health of of the residents of Israel.” The Brothers and Sisters in Arms protest group also urges all those who are needed to report for duty “without hesitation.”

A joint statement from Knesset opposition party heads gave full backing to the IDF and called on the international community to condemn the acts of terror.

Yesh Atid head Yair Lapid, National Unity head Benny Gantz, Yisrael Beitenu head Avigdor Lieberman and Labor party head Merav Michaeli said, “In days like these there is no opposition and no coalition in Israel.”

We “are united in the face of terrorism” and the need to strike with “a strong and determined fist,” said the statement, calling for retribution against Hamas and all terrorist organizations that cooperate with it.

Hundreds of reservists had previously refused to report for duty so long as the government pursued its controversial reform.

President Isaac Herzog also called for solidarity.

“The State of Israel is at a difficult moment. I am wishing much strength to the IDF, its commanders and fighters and the entirety of the security and rescue forces,” Herzog wrote on X.

“I wish to encourage and strengthen all in Israel who are under attack. I urge everyone to follow the instructions of the Home Front Command, and demonstrate mutual solidarity and calm. Together we will triumph over those who wish to harm us

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Tuesday that the Israel Defense Forces is moving to a “full offense” against the Gaza Strip, as sporadic clashes with Hamas terrorists in southern Israel continued for the fourth day.

“I have released all the restraints, we have [regained] control of the area, and we are moving to a full offense,” Gallant said in an address to troops along the Gaza border.

“You will have the ability to change the reality here. You have seen the prices [being paid], and you will get to see the change. Hamas wanted a change in Gaza; it will change 180 degrees from what it thought,”

Ministry)

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“You will have the ability to change the reality here. You have seen the prices [being paid], and you will get to see the change. Hamas wanted a change in Gaza; it will change 180 degrees from what it thought,” he said. “They will regret this moment, Gaza will never go back to what it was,” Gallant continued. “Whoever comes to decapitate, murder women, Holocaust survivors, we will eliminate him with all our might, and without compromise.”

An Egyptian official told The Times of Israel on Tuesday that Cairo has been informed by Israel that it is readying for a monthslong ground campaign in Gaza

“we will return here, to Be’eri, in a few months, and the situation will be different. We will resettle the kibbutz until its last meter.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly told US President Joe Biden on Monday that Israel has no choice but to launch a ground operation against Hamas in Gaza.

We have to go in. We can’t negotiate now,” Netanyahu was quoted as saying by the Axios news site. “We need to restore deterrence.” According to the report, which cited three US and Israeli sources, Biden did not try to change Netanyahu’s mind.

Speaking not long after Gallant on Tuesday, the IDF’s top spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said that killing senior Hamas members is a top priority.

“We will not stop the effort to eliminate senior Hamas officials, this is a top priority,” Hagari said in a press conference, after Israeli strikes killed two senior Hamas members Monday night

The directive to the forces is clear. Find terrorists and destroy them,” Hagari said. “We are making a strong defense on the border. There were infiltration attempts today, but the terrorists were eliminated before they reached the fence.”Hagari also said the bodies of 103 terrorists were found in Kibbutz Be’eri alone, after they were killed in clashes with troops. More than 100 Israelis were murdered by the terrorists in the kibbutz.

Almost two months after the unprecedented Hamas onslaught on southern Israel, which left some 1,200 people dead, the exact data on those killed in the biggest terror attack in Israeli history is still shrouded in uncertainty.

There have been efforts to compile the available data, particularly the number of babies, children, and elderly people murdered on October 7, even as several members of emergency organizations have been quoted giving imprecise information.

Authorities have identified a total of 274 soldiers and 859 non-soldiers killed during the brutal assault. The latter figure includes 57 Israel Police officers and 38 local security officers. It is unclear which of these individuals were on duty when killed. Removing those victims leaves a figure of 764 civilians.

Partial data by Hebrew media covering the civilians — killed by thousands of invading terrorists and by some of the thousands of rockets fired that day at Israeli cities — reveals that they include two infants, 12 other children under the age of 10, 36 civilians aged 10-19, and 25 elderly people over the age of 80, accounting for 75 of the 764 civilians.

Israel has also named another 15 civilians and members of security forces (not included in the 764 above) who were killed and whose remains are held by terrorists in the Gaza Strip. There are 122 other Israelis and foreigners currently being held hostage in Gaza as a result of the October 7 assault — an unknown number of whom are dead — after a total of 109 hostages were freed by Hamas. Another hostage (a soldier) was rescued alive by IDF forces, and three bodies of slain hostages — two civilians and one soldier — were recovered by Israeli troops and returned to Israel (also to be added to the sum total of Israelis killed on October 7).

An additional seven Israelis are currently listed as missing, with their families having received no information from authorities about whether they were killed or abducted. An unknown number of foreigners are similarly unaccounted for.

An unknown number of bodies — in mid-November the number was around 100 — are still awaiting identification at the Shura pathological center near Tel Aviv, with difficulties in the process arising because of the state of the remains. Some of the remains are believed to belong to Hamas terrorists.

In summary, Israel has officially identified 1,151 people murdered in the Hamas onslaught, with an unknown number of others still awaiting confirmation, and some of the remaining Gaza hostages possibly dead as well.

Authorities have yet to provide an official breakdown on the victims. But the Walla news site has published data by age and gender for 756 of the murdered civilians for which information is available.

One of them was a baby under the age of one year — [10-month-old Mila Cohen](https://www.timesofisrael.com/yona-ohad-mila-cohen-73-43-10-months-three-generations-slain/), killed with her father and grandmother.

According to data by Haaretz, a Bedouin woman at the tail end of her pregnancy was shot in the abdomen while heading to the hospital to give birth, where doctors delivered the baby, but failed to save it.

Additionally, 12 children aged 1 to 9 — 10 boys and two girls — were murdered in the Hamas massacres, according to Walla.

Between the ages of 10 and 19, 36 civilians were murdered, 25 of them male and 11 female.

The largest number of confirmed civilian victims, 421, were in the age group of 20-40. Among them were 259 men and 162 women.

There were 161 victims between the ages of 41 and 64 — 102 men and 59 women.

Walla reported that 100 victims were aged 65-80, including 69 women and 31 men.

And 25 victims were over the age of 80 — 18 men and seven women.

With Israel [using advanced technological methods](https://www.timesofisrael.com/trained-to-analyze-ancient-carnage-archaeologists-locate-victims-among-kibbutz-ashes/) — including from the field of archaeology — to locate the missing and identify more severely mutilated or burnt bodies, authorities hope to soon bring clarity, both to the families of still-missing loved ones, and to the general public, regarding the worst attack on Israeli civilians in the country’s history.

Five opposition lawmakers joined Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s cabinet on Thursday, forming a national emergency government meant to add decades of high-level security experience to the management of the war and isolate far-right influence, six days into Israel’s fight against terror groups in the Gaza Strip.

Speaking from the Knesset rostrum, Netanyahu called the Hamas terror onslaught that massacred over 1,300 — the vast majority of them civilians — and wounded more than 3,000, triggering the war, “the most horrible day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust,” saying it would be hard to find someone unaffected by Hamas’s “barbarism.”

The Knesset voted to approve adding five National Unity ministers to the government, 66 for and four against. Amid the mounting wartime strain on the national health system, the plenum also approved Shas MK Uriel Buso’s elevation to health minister, by a vote of 65 for and 0 against, stripping the portfolio from Interior Minister Moshe Arbel.

The agreement added National Unity MKs Benny Gantz, Gadi Eisenkot, Gideon Sa’ar, Chili Tropper and Yifat Shasha-Biton to the government, as ministers without portfolio. All will sit on the security cabinet, although Shasha-Biton will only hold observer status. Both Gantz and Eisenkot are former Israel Defense Forces chiefs of staff, and Gantz is a former defense minister.

Gantz will also sit on a war cabinet with Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Eisenkot and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, a Netanyahu confidant, will join the war cabinet as observers

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Opposition Leader Yair Lapid made early overtures to form a unity government with Netanyahu, but was not part of the final deal. On Thursday, Lapid said that his Yesh Atid party would continue to support the war effort from outside the coalition, but he would not join the government because he does not believe it would work

With the expanded emergency government formally sworn in, the war cabinet is set to meet at least every 48 hours, according to Gantz and Netanyahu’s deal.

Among its various powers, the war cabinet can issue operational directives to security services, and can expand war goals after its first meeting.

In order to secure the deal, Gantz and Netanyahu committed to freezing all non-war related or non-emergency legislation, including bills related to the government’s contentious judicial overhaul package.

Ministers from Likud and National Unity applauded the deal, with Culture and Sport Minister Miki Zohar applauding Gantz, and new National Unity minister Sa’ar celebrating the move as giving broader support to make tough decisions.

“Hard decisions always need wide backing, and that’s what we’re doing today,” Sa’ar said to the Knesset floor.

Making an apparent jab at Yesh Atid for sitting out the emergency government, Sa’ar said, “Yes, it’s easier to support from the outside. You’re not carrying the heavy burden.”

In his remarks before the vote, Lapid pointed to three issues that prevented his party from joining the cabinet: the persistence of “extremists” in the hardline government, a double security cabinet structure without clear lines of authority, and the presence of those at fault for the “failure” to prevent Saturday’s crushing Hamas massacre, which triggered the war

Lapid declined to name the extremists outright, but later in the speech pointed to far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, saying their presence in the government is part of “no way to make decisions.”

Ben Gvir and Smotrich sit on the security cabinet.

Lapid said it was a particular problem that Ben Gvir is in charge of the Israel Police and that Smotrich oversees the West Bank’s Civil Administration, especially as he has failed to condemn recent retributive Jewish violence in Palestinian towns.

“If I had thought that what is happening today is a real unity government, I would have done it,” Lapid said, adding that in the interim, “We’ll support every action, we’ll help every way we can.”

The percentage of Arab Israelis who feel kinship with the state has risen dramatically since war with Hamas broke out on October 7, a new survey has found.

The [poll](https://en.idi.org.il/articles/51431) by the Israel Democracy Institute found the percentage of both Jewish and Arab Israelis who said they feel a part of the State of Israel and its problems at a 20-year high, at 94% and 70% respectively. Among Arabs, the figure stood at 48% in June.

Conversely, Jews and Arabs showed very different results regarding their optimism about the future of the country, with Arabs at a 5-month low, at 27%. Meanwhile, Jews were at a five-month high of 72% — up from 52% in June, amid the internal fight over the government’s contentious judicial overhaul, and slightly up from a rate of 65%-68% in mid-October, shortly after the Hamas attack.

Asked how they rated Israeli society’s resilience, 90% of Jews and 58% of Arabs said it was high.

The survey also found a majority of Israelis (61%) believe the government’s focus on its highly contentious judicial overhaul efforts played a part in Hamas’s decision to launch the assault, and affected the country’s readiness for it.

Asked whether Israel should negotiate immediately for the release of over 240 people abducted to Gaza, 38% said it should but while continuing to fight, 22% said it shouldn’t negotiate, 21% said it should even if it means stopping the military campaign, 10% said it should not negotiate right now, but can when fighting concludes, and 9% didn’t know.

war, October 2023 (Social media)

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In the October 7 Hamas offensive in southern Israel, thousands of terrorists broke through the border and killed some 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and abducted over 240. Israel has waged war on Hamas ever since. The terror group claims over 11,000 people have been killed in the Strip, figures that cannot be verified.

The IDI survey was conducted via the internet and by phone between November 5–6. The maximum sampling error was ±4.04% at a confidence level of 95%.

Israel announced on Sunday that 12 licenses have been awarded to six companies, including British multinational oil and gas firm BP plc and Italian energy giant Eni, to explore and discover additional offshore natural gas fields.

Energy Minister Israel Katz said that the investment commitment by large natural gas exploration companies during this period as Israel is at war with the Hamas terror group is a sign of confidence in Israel’s resilience.

The announcement comes after Israel [decided](https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-heavy-rocket-fire-israel-shuts-down-tamar-offshore-natural-gas-field/) to temporarily shut down the Tamar offshore natural gas field on October 9, two days after the Hamas massacre, which saw some 2,500 terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing some 230 hostages of all ages under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

Reserve, on January 1, 2020. (Flash90/File)

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“The winning companies have committed to unprecedented investments in natural gas exploration over the coming three years, in the hope of discovering new natural gas reserves,” said Katz.

The discoveries would “strengthen Israel’s energy security, international ties, lower the cost of living and provide energy support to accelerate the transition of the economy to renewable energies,”

The offshore tender marks the fourth bidding process for natural gas exploration in Israel’s economic waters, which the ministry said is directed to boost competition, ensure supply to the domestic market, expand state revenues, and encourage the signing of additional gas export agreements.

The winning companies in the fourth offshore bid round are divided into two consortia, which will explore in two areas adjacent to Israel’s Leviathan field, one of the world’s largest deep-water gas discoveries. One group consists of Eni, Dana Petroleum and Ratio Energies and the other group comprises BP, State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) and NewMed Energy.

Initially, exploration licenses will be granted to the winners of the bid for a period of three years. During this period of time, the license holders will perform exploratory work on the entire license areas, as part of the work program commitments included in their bids. After drilling of at least one well and carrying out the additional work plan, it will be possible for license holders to extend the license period in the cluster by two additional years, up to maximum of seven years, as stipulated in the Petroleum Law.Since Israel first discovered natural gas fields off its Mediterranean coast more than a decade ago, the country has emerged as a gas exporter. The natural gas operations have put the country on a path to energy independence — and have shielded it from the worst of the energy crisis sparked by the Russian war on Ukraine this year — in a region with few natural resources.

Major offshore discoveries, including the Leviathan field, which contains an estimated 22 trillion cubic feet of gas, have attracted large oil and gas explorers, such as US energy giant Chevron to partner with local companies.

Back in 2020, Israel started pumping natural gas to Egypt from the Leviathan gas field. In June of last year, Israel, Egypt and the European Union signed a memorandum of understanding that could see Israel export its natural gas to the bloc for the first time.

While the world is focused on the war in Gaza since the Hamas terror group’s devastating assault on Israel, tensions have risen in the West Bank, where 55 Palestinians were killed over the past week in clashes with Israeli troops, arrest raids and attacks by Jewish settlers, according to the Palestinian Authority’s health ministry.

UN monitors said it was the deadliest week for Palestinians in the West Bank since at least 2005.

Since Hamas’s mass incursion into southern Israel, in which terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing over 1,300 people, and abducting some 150-200 hostages of all ages, Israeli forces have held the West Bank under a tight grip, closing crossings into the territory and checkpoints between cities, measures they say are aimed at preventing attacks

The vast majority of those killed on October 7 as the Hamas gunmen seized Israeli border communities were civilians — men, women, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists, in what US President Joe Biden has highlighted as “the worst massacre of the Jewish people since the Holocaust.”

There have been several clashes between IDF forces and Palestinians in the West Bank in the days since, with the army reporting at least 10 attempted terror attacks.

Friday was a particularly deadly day, with 16 Palestinians killed in different incidents in the West Bank, according to PA figures. Police said four of those were shot and killed by officers after [setting off explosive devices](https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-kill-4-palestinians-trying-to-blow-a-hole-in-west-bank-security-barrier/) in an apparent attempt to breach the West Bank security barrier.

The military said Sunday it had arrested 330 people in raids across the West Bank, including 190 affiliated with Hamas, since last weekend’s attack. It said 33 Hamas members alone were arrested in raids overnight Saturday.

The renewed crackdown comes as Israel is concerned about the conflict escalating into a multi-front war, particularly the possibility of Lebanon’s Iran-backed Hezbollah terror organization joining the battle.

But Palestinians claim the latest Israeli measures in the West Bank have only further blurred the line between security forces and radical, violent settlers. Israel’s National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, a far-right settler with a long history of anti-Arab incitement, responded to the Hamas attack by distributing more weapons to the settler population and tasking settlers with security.In a statement after the Hamas massacres in southern Israel, he said his office was distributing 10,000 firearms, as well as combat gear, protective vests and helmets, to Israeli civilians — with a particular focus on residents of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

“We will change the world so that the settlements will be protected,” he said. “I have ordered the massive arming of the civilian standby units in order to protect the settlements and the cities.”

On Friday, a video showed a settler with an assault rifle walking into the village of Al-Tuwani in the southern West Bank and shooting a Palestinian point blank.

Two days earlier, the PA [reported](https://www.timesofisrael.com/three-palestinians-said-killed-in-clashes-with-settlers-in-west-bank/) settlers shot dead three Palestinians in the village of Qusra, near the northern West Bank city of Nablus. On Thursday, [settlers attacked their funeral](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-palestinians-killed-after-settlers-said-to-ambush-funeral-in-west-bank/), killing another two men, according to the PA health ministry. Video footage showed the settlers swerving their cars into the funeral procession before stopping and opening fire.

On Thursday, settlers arrived at Wadi Seeq, a small Bedouin village home to around 200 people in the central West Bank, as Palestinians there packed up their belongings. They had already moved all of the women, children and livestock to a safer area in recent days because of rising threats, a resident of the village said. Witnesses said that the settlers opened fire, wounding three Palestinians and driving the rest out of the village.

Abdelrahman Kaabni, the head of the Wadi Seeq village council, said that soldiers and police had taken part in the attack, beating and arresting residents. As the villagers of Wadi Seeq fled settler violence, they left behind cisterns, livestock, solar panels and two vehicles. “The settlers took everything, and now they’re squatting in our homes,” Kaabni said.

Wadi Seeq is the sixth Bedouin village to have pulled up stakes in the last year in response to an uptick in settler attacks. Many more are in danger of being completely displaced, according to the West Bank Protection Consortium, a coalition of aid groups and donor countries, including the European Union, that support Palestinian communities.

Neither COGAT, the Israeli defense body responsible for civilian affairs, nor the Israeli military responded to requests for comment. In the past, authorities have said troops only open fire in response to threats or to disperse violent protests and that soldiers protect Palestinians from settler attacks.

The UN said last month that 1,100 Palestinians had been displaced by settler violence in the last year, an unprecedented figure. Over just the last few days, around 200 to 300 Palestinians have been displaced in Wadi Seeq and other areas, the consortium said — often by settlers who are armed.

“They’re leaving now because they feel completely unprotected. They’re so scared of those settlers who have come in and threatened them,” said Allegra Pacheco, who heads the consortium.

Most of the attacks come from settler outposts established without government authorization but protected by the Israeli army. Over 500,000 Jewish settlers live in nearly 150 settlements across the West Bank, which is home to some 2.5 million Palestinians. Most of the international community views settlements as illegal and a major obstacle to peace. Israel captured the West Bank, along with Gaza and East Jerusalem, in the 1967 Six Day War. The Palestinians want the territories for their future state.

On Saturday, Israeli military spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari appeared to be calling on settlers to stand down, saying: “The responsibility for security in the settlements and on the roads lies with the army alone.”

But messages continued to circulate on WhatsApp groups that Jewish settlers have created since the start of the war to coordinate operations in the West Bank. A description of one chat group with over 800 participants told residents to prepare for “the possibility of mobilizing for a joint activity with the security forces for the immediate demolition of terrorist houses.”

The message urged residents to “eliminate” any Palestinian approaching a settlement.

“From the stories flowing in from the Gaza Strip, it is clear that we cannot rely on the army alone to be able to protect us in a time of chaos,” it read. “Are you ready for war?

AFP — Nearly two decades after Israeli settlers left Gaza, the Hamas terror group’s October 7 attacks on Israeli territory, and the subsequent war, have rekindled a wish among some of a return to the Palestinian enclave.

“It cannot be more dangerous to have our families inside Gaza than next to Gaza,” said Zevulun Kalfa, 61, recalling the bloody assault carried out by some 2,500 terrorists earlier this month that hit his kibbutz and other Israeli communities near the border of the Gaza Strip.

Some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, were killed during the assault, and at least 228 more were abducted into the Strip. Entire families were shot or burnt to death in their homes, and some 260 people were mown down at an outdoor music festival.

Kalfa has fond memories of his years in the former Israeli settlement of Atzmona, just north of Rafah in the southern Strip.

“We would hitchhike to Shejaiya (in Gaza City) without weapons… just to do our shopping or go to the dentist,” said Kalfa. “They would sell us fish.”

But his former neighbors — Gaza’s Palestinian inhabitants — have allowed “Hamas to feed hatred to their children,” Kalfa claimed.

Israel unilaterally withdrew the last of its troops and 8,000 settlers on September 11, 2005, ending the Israeli presence in Gaza that began in 1967 with the Six Day War. Israel has continued to maintain near complete control over the territory’s borders, as has Egypt.

The images from 2005 of weeping Israelis leaving their homes in Gaza settlements, soldiers in tears as they carried out evacuation orders, bulldozers razing houses and synagogues set ablaze by the entering Palestinians have been etched into the collective Israeli memory.

While no Israeli officials have suggested that a potential ground invasion into Gaza would have the aim of resettling the territory, some parts of public opinion now view resettlement as a fitting response to the October 7 violence.

“We have children and grandchildren who dream of returning there,” said Kalfa, now an administrative official in Sa’ad, a Jewish religious kibbutz less than four kilometers (2.5 miles) from the Gaza border.

“As soon as the government decides, we’re ready.”

Rabbi Yitzhak Amitai, also a former settler, stood armed and in uniform near the entrance to Sa’ad. “With God’s help” his family would soon resettle in Gaza, he said.

Israel’s settlements in the West Bank and Golan Heights are considered illegal under international law, as were those in Gaza prior to 2005.

Kalfa voiced more skepticism of a hypothetical renewed Israeli presence inside Gaza, but drew parallels with the capture of East Jerusalem during the Six Day War, which he said had not been part of Israel’s objectives at the time.

“We said back in 2014 (when Israeli forces last launched a major ground incursion into Gaza) that the only solution was a land incursion, complete cleansing of Hamas and reestablishment of Israeli authority” over the Palestinian territory of 2 million inhabitants, Kalfa added.

About 1.4 million residents of Gaza have been internally displaced since the latest war broke out, according to the UN humanitarian agency OCHA.

The case for Gaza resettlement has gained some ground among Israelis, many of whom were traumatized and galvanized by the October 7 massacreRecent public opinion polls suggested wide support among Israelis for a continued offensive against Hamas.

In Gaza, the Hamas-run health ministry said Israeli raids have killed more than 6,500 people, most of them civilians. However, it is not possible for these numbers to be verified by external sources, and the figure likely includes Hamas’s own dead as well as those killed by misfired Gazan rockets aimed at Israel that fell short within the Strip. Israel estimates that 1,500 Hamas terrorists alone were killed by Israeli security forces inside Israel following their rampage.

The move toward more hawkish views on Gaza in Israeli public opinion comes less than a year after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed what is considered one of the most right-wing governments in Israel’s 75-year history, with pro-settlement allies.

“We return to Gaza,” read some 15 signs put up at the entrance to Jerusalem, calling for donations to a fundraising campaign for settlements.

In footage that went viral this week on social media, Israeli singer Hanan Ben Ari, entertaining troops at an army base, called: “We return to Gush Katif” — Israel’s term for the former settlement bloc in Gaza.

“We (will) set up Nova beach on the Gaza beach,” Ben Ari sang to the tune of one of his hits, referring to the Supernova desert rave where more than 260 people were brutally murdered by Hamas on October 7.

Along with the video, the Hebrew hashtag “Nova Beach” has become instantly popular.

Elad, 50, a reserve soldier who asked to be identified by his first name only, had spent his childhood in a Gaza settlement and now lives in another in the West Bank.

He told AFP that after the war, he would want to “return to Gaza, where there are the best beaches in Israel.”

“These acts constitute gross violation of international law, and, in particular, of international criminal law,” declared the document, signed by academic figures and legal authorities in Israel and abroad.

“Videos, released mostly by Hamas, posted on social media, document acts of torture, sexual violence, violence towards children and molestation of bodies,”

“As these widespread, horrendous acts appear to have been carried out with an ‘intent to destroy, in whole or in part’ a national group – Israelis – a goal explicitly declared by Hamas, they most probably constitute an international crime of genocide, proscribed by the Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” it added.

Among those who signed the document was Prof. Irwin Cotler, the former justice minister and attorney general of Canada.

Dan Eldad, who served as Israel’s acting state attorney from February to May 2020 and who helped put the letter together, told The Times of Israel that it may have key diplomatic value should Israel seek to persuade other countries or international organizations that remain on the fence to come down on its side, and in confronting those who express support for the Palestinian position.

“They can go to them and say, ‘Look, it was genocide,'” he said.

On October 7, over 1,500 Hamas terrorists stormed Israel’s border around the Gaza Strip and murderously rampaged through southern areas, taking over communities and killing the men, women and children they found, as well as overrunning military sites with similar deadly results. The toll from the bloody assault, which came alongside a widespread barrage of 5,000 rockets fired indiscriminately at towns and cities across Israel, has swelled to more than 1,300, the vast majority of them civilians. Thousands more were injured, hundreds of them seriously.

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Among the dead were dozens of babies. Some of the victims, including entire families who were butchered, were reportedly beheaded. At an outdoor music festival, surrounded by the attackers, 260 people were systematically mowed down. In addition, the terrorists abducted around 150 people of all ages, including children and elderly women, dragging them to Gaza as captives. Hamas has continued to indiscriminately rain rockets on civilian areas of southern and central issues since the attack started.

The legal opinion released Sunday was organized by the Hostage and Missing Families Forum, a volunteer-based organization that was formed after the attack and is striving to secure the return of the hostages held in the Gaza Strip.

Eldad said the document was composed by a number of professors in Israel who then distributed it to their peers across the world.

“The taking of hostages is defined as a war crime,” the statement said, clarifying that laws regarding the right to hold prisoners of war do not apply to terrorist organizations.

“Thus, holding both civilian and soldier hostages constitutes a war crime,” the document continued. “The circumstances surrounding the kidnapping of all hostages, civilian and soldiers, reveals that they were taken with the purpose of holding them hostage. Hamas must release all hostages immediately.”

Further, “the abduction of people without provision of information regarding their whereabouts constitutes the [war] crime of enforced disappearances.” Available information indicates that “many abductees were tortured by their captors” and as those acts were committed as part of Hamas’s policy to attack civilians they “constitute crimes against humanity, for which perpetrators must bear full accountability,” the experts said.

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Until the hostages are released, Hamas is obliged under international law to provide information about the captives including their medical condition, as well as providing medical care, they stressed.

They called for the International Committee of the Red Cross and “all relevant UN agencies” to demand Hamas grant access to the abductees.

“These organizations must also do their utmost to ensure that essential foodstuff and appropriate medical treatment are provided,”

The international community and organizations have a duty to use all means to pressure Hamas to give precedence to the immediate release of protected groups, such as “children, women, older persons, people with disabilities and those in need of medical treatment,” the document urged.

Israel has retaliated to the attacks with artillery and airstrikes, and officials from the Hamas-controlled health ministry estimated more than 2,000 Palestinians dead. Israel says it is targeting terrorist infrastructure and all areas where Hamas operates or hides out while issuing evacuation warnings to civilians in regions it plans to attack.

A [coded document](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-coded-doc-hamas-instructed-terrorists-to-kill-civilians-take-captives-report/) found in a vehicle used by Hamas terrorists in their shock assault on Israel showed they were instructed to massacre civilians and take captives, according to a television report Saturday.

The Kan public broadcaster reported that the document was recovered at Kibbutz Re’im, outside of which at least 260 people were killed and an unknown number taken hostage at a music festival.

The report came a day after Kan revealed a different document left behind by a Hamas terrorist in southern Israel that ordered terrorists to kill as many civilians as possible in their takeover of Kibbutz Alumim.

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On Saturday, NBC News reported on additional documents recovered from terrorists showed extensive Hamas plans to target an elementary school and a youth center, kill “as many people as possible” and take hostages quickly into Gaza from Kibbutz Sa’ad.

The Health Ministry on Monday instructed members of the healthcare system not to cooperate with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, citing its perceived anti-Israel stance.

In recent weeks, senior physicians and hospital staff who treated October 7 victims and released hostages have received letters and emails from the [commission](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-israel/index), which operates under the UN Council for Human Rights. The commission requested information and interviews for its [investigation of international and gender-based crimes](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/commission-inquiry-collecting-evidence-war-crimes-committed-all-sides-israel) since the beginning of the current Israel-Hamas war.

The findings of the commission’s investigations will be presented in its reports to the Human Rights Council in June and to the UN General Assembly in October.

Israel’s Kan public broadcaster reported that the Justice Ministry instructed the legal department of the Health Ministry to tell Israeli doctors and others involved in the care of October 7 victims and released hostages not to speak with the committee of inquiry.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lior Haiat called the commission “an anti-Israeli and antisemitic body” and said Israel would not cooperate with it.

When asked by The Times of Israel what these claims were based on, Haiat said, “The commission of inquiry is there to investigate Israel without any time limits, unlike any other commission of inquiry from the UN system.”

“Furthermore, the three people chosen to head it are famous antisemitic and anti-Israel people,”

The commission’s chair is Navanethem (Navi) Pillay from South Africa, who served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014 and is currently a judge ad hoc of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

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The commission’s other leaders are Miloon Kothari from India, the first UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, and Chris Sidoti from Australia, an international human rights consultant and an expert in national human rights institutions and international human rights law and mechanisms.

All three have made [statements](https://www.timesofisrael.com/member-of-un-gaza-probe-apologizes-for-jewish-lobby-remark-slammed-as-antisemitic/) in the past that Israel has deemed to be incorrect, offensive, or defamatory regarding the Jewish state or the global Jewish community, or both.

n an October 25 videotaped UN [press conference](https://youtu.be/XuPGXoKCCz8?si=-TC9O4vWzLVzSJfK), Pillay noted the commission’s [statement](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/commission-inquiry-collecting-evidence-war-crimes-committed-all-sides-israel) released on October 10 condemning the Hamas attacks and calling for a cessation of hostilities and the return of hostages. “We named and condemned Hamas, but we also unequivocally condemn Israeli military attacks that result inevitably in the deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza,” Pillay said.

“Because of this continuing mandate of ours, we are in the position to examine issues such as the right of defense. But as we see it played out here, it is more a matter of retaliation and revenge,” she said.

Pillay characterized the Israeli government’s military policies and plans in the current war as “activity with the intent of pursuing collective punishment on all of Gaza and all Palestinian citizens.”

Kothari, in an interview with the anti-Israel website Mondoweiss in July 2022, was asked about criticism of the UN Commission of Inquiry investigating rights abuses in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

“We are very disheartened by the social media that is controlled largely by, whether it is the Jewish lobby or it is specific NGOs, a lot of money is being thrown into trying to discredit us,” he said in the interview.

He also said, the same month: “I would go as far as to raise the question of why Israel is even a member of the United Nations.”

In June 2022, Sidoti dismissed accusations of antisemitism against the commission and said these were being “thrown around like rice at a wedding.”

“It is a tragedy and a travesty to trivialize antisemitism for political purposes, to rob it of its content, to use it as a shield for ordinary criticism of the actions of a state,” he added.

While Israel has criticized the UN and international human rights organizations for [not immediately calling out](https://www.timesofisrael.com/graphic-report-details-new-evidence-of-rape-sexual-violence-during-october-7-rampage/) war crimes and gender-based crimes committed by Hamas against Israelis on October 7, it opposes an investigation by this particular body, which has a long history of perceived anti-Israel bias.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel was established by the UN Human Rights Council in May 2021, following [Operation Guardian of the Walls](https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/wars-and-operations/operation-guardian-of-the-walls/operation-guardian-of-the-walls-1/). The conflict, sparked by rocket fire by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad from Gaza on Jerusalem and other Israeli cities, lasted 12 days. The conflict also involved violent civil unrest between Jews and Arabs within Israel.

The commission of inquiry was set up as “an ongoing, independent, international commission of inquiry to investigate, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel, all alleged violations of international humanitarian law and abuses of international human rights law leading up and since 13 April 2021.”

The commission has an additional mandate to “investigate all underlying root causes of recurrent tensions, instability and protraction of [the] conflict, including systematic discrimination and repression based on national, ethnic, racial or religious identity.”

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The commission has held several public hearings in Geneva, and in December 2022 welcomed the UN General Assembly resolution requesting an ICJ advisory opinion relating to “the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.”

In one of its reports, the commission condemned “attacks, restrictions, and harassment of civil society actors in Israel, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory including East Jerusalem,” placing blame mainly on Israeli authorities.

It labeled this as “part of the Israeli government’s goal of ensuring and enshrining its permanent occupation at the expense of the rights of the Palestinian people.”

In an interview with South African Broadcasting Corporation in November, Pillay stated, “Israel’s increasingly militarized law enforcement operations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and repeated attacks on Gaza, consistently violate international human rights law and international humanitarian law.”

It is hard in the wake of the October 7 massacre to calmly contemplate Palestinian strategy and thinking. There is no Israeli unaffected, no one without family and friends reeling from the Hamas onslaught, no one, including this writer, not overcome with anxiety for relatives or neighbors now called up to the war.

And yet it is necessary. It is necessary to understand the enemy, the chain of rationalization and habits of mind that produced it and shaped its strategy of brutality.

That enemy is not the Palestinian people, of course, even though support for terror attacks is widespread among Palestinians. The enemy is not exactly Hamas either, though Hamas is part of it. The enemy is the Palestinian theory of Israelis that makes the violence seen on October 7 seem to many of them a rational step on the road to liberation rather than, as Israelis judge it, yet another in a long string of self-inflicted disasters for the Palestinian cause.

The October 7 massacre wasn’t an outlier in Hamas’s long history of brutality; it was its apotheosis. It was what Hamas would do if it could. On that dark Saturday it suddenly found that it could, and so it did.

But the unbelievable brutality displayed by the terrorists doesn’t mean the massacre was an emotional act. Palestinian terrorism is rarely chaotic and emotionally driven. The most horrifying examples of it, suicide bombings of the past or the rampage and mass kidnapping seen on Saturday, are carefully planned and deliberate acts.

The Palestinian strategy of terrorizing Israeli civilians is old, older even than the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. When the PLO was founded in 1964 with the goal of driving the Jews from the country, the West Bank was still ruled by Jordan and the Gaza Strip by Egypt. The PLO adopted terrorism as the basic strategy for Palestinian liberation not in anger, but because it had just witnessed the astonishing success of the Algerian National Liberation Front in using such terrorism to drive the French from Algeria in 1962.And it goes back further still. Organized Palestinian violence against the Jews in 1920, 1929, the so-called Arab Revolt of 1936-39 — all followed the same basic theory: The Jews are an artificial, rootless polity removable by sustained violence, so sustained violence must be deployed to remove them.

This Palestinian vision of Israelis is taught to Palestinian children as the basic truth of the Palestinian struggle. The contrast between “rooted” Palestine and “artificial” Israel is a major theme of Palestinian identity.

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The consequences of this longstanding vision and strategy has been nothing short of shattering for Palestinians.

### What do they want?

Supporters of the Palestinian cause in the West, even as they are discomfited by images of parents lying murdered in front of their children or the burned corpses of babies, are now asking a simple question in Hamas’s defense: “What would you do if faced with decades of Israeli occupation?” Israel’s policies in the West Bank and toward Gaza, and the pain and injustices that flow from them, they argue, are the cause of the kind of hatred on display on October 7

The problem for Palestinians — and it is a problem with immense consequences for them — is that the vast majority of Israelis disagree. They believe Hamas would have acted the same even if the occupation had ended two decades ago. This belief may seem self-serving to outsiders, but it’s rooted in deep and painful experience.

The fall of 2000 saw the start of a wave of some 140 suicide bombings in Israeli cities and towns, killing grandmothers and infants in buses and pizzerias and driving the political left from power so comprehensively that a generation later it has scarcely recovered.

The shattering effect of this mass murder wasn’t caused just by the shock and trauma of the attacks. It was also the timing.

In 2000, the peace process hadn’t yet seen two decades of stagnation. No far-right parties sat in the ruling coalition. Ending the occupation was an idea that won an election. Negotiators at Camp David were reported to be discussing shared Israeli-Palestinian sovereignty on the Temple Mount. There were no Israeli soldiers in any Palestinian city or town — they’d been pulled out over the previous three years — and Palestinian incomes and college education rates were rising. Things seemed to be falling into place. Peace, many Israelis assumed, was imminent.

The political left had also fought what amounted to an internal political civil war to get to that point, seen its leader assassinated and eked out a hard-won victory in the 1999 election to finish the job of peacemaking, and the result of its efforts was the most gruesome and sustained Palestinian assault on Israeli civilians in the country’s history.

So what was that massive, sustained terrorist wave about?

Palestinian explanations only heightened the anger. Palestinian officials went on Israeli television and told Israelis that the culprit was the visit to the Temple Mount by then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon shortly before the outbreak of violence. For the Israeli left, it was worse than no explanation at all. It amounted to telling left-wing Israelis that all their struggles and sacrifices for peace had stood on a foundation of dust and were demolished by the first act of right-wing political posturing that Palestinians found unpleasant. This spasm of killings, the Palestinian explanation implied, was inevitable.

Palestinian intellectuals have since offered better answers, including that the violence began as an internal Palestinian uprising against Yasser Arafat’s increasingly tyrannical regime in Ramallah, a kind of presaging of the Arab Spring in 2011, and was quickly deflected by a frightened Arafat into a campaign of terrorism targeting Israeli civilians.

But amid the bombings, few Israelis had the bandwidth to contemplate such complexities.

To them, it felt like all Palestinians had rallied to the murderous campaign. To recruit hundreds of suicide bombers (some 140 made it past the Israeli security services; a much larger number tried or made plans to), one needs an infrastructure of recruitment, a leadership that offers religious and social validation for the attacks, supply networks, laboratories and engineers to produce the bombs, a basic intelligence apparatus to help the bombers past Israeli security, along with bank accounts, safe-houses and the like.

And for what? The question has haunted and undermined the Israeli left for a generation.

Would an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank have prevented Hamas’s attack on October 7? Israelis, still living in the shadow of that two-decade-old trauma, do not think so. They believe, truly and earnestly, including among liberal voters, that such a withdrawal would only have created a larger terror polity capable of launching a much larger rampage.

And that Israeli belief is the Palestinians’ single biggest strategic problem, even if neither their leaders nor their overseas supporters are willing to acknowledge it.

This belief immunizes Israelis to outside pressure. If the response of Palestinian politics to the Oslo peace process was the mass murder of Israeli civilians, and the response of Palestinian politics to the stagnation of the peace process under Benjamin Netanyahu is the mass murder of Israeli civilians, then Israeli policy isn’t the cause of Palestinian mass murder of Israeli civilians.

Similarly, while overseas activists threaten Israelis with boycotts if they don’t leave the West Bank, Hamas threatens Israelis with murder from any territory they do abandon. Hamas is louder.

The point isn’t that this Israeli experience is the objective, comprehensive historical truth, but only that the vast majority of the Israeli Jewish mainstream believes it and that this belief is strong and rooted in blood-soaked experience. It has rendered Israelis immune to both foreign economic pressure and Palestinian violence.

In the Israeli mind, the Palestinian national movement seems set against itself. There is nothing the global campaign for Palestine can do in the Israeli psyche that Hamas’s brutality won’t undo.

### Clarity

Then came Saturday, and the death of Israeli questions. For a moment, Israel’s guard went down. Hamas was free to live out its intentions. It did so with blazing clarity and purpose.

It is obvious to Israelis that Hamas’s brutal strategy cannot liberate Palestinians, so the violence can’t be explained to them as an attempt at liberation. Nor does Hamas bother to articulate its strategic rationale to Israelis, as Algeria’s FLN once did so clearly to the French. It asks them to flee or die, but can’t articulate where they should flee to.

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Israelis are now convinced that the massacre on October 7, in its enormity and astonishing cruelty, and especially in the joy with which it was carried out, wasn’t a Palestinian miscalculation, because Palestinian independence wasn’t its goal.

The goal on October 7, as in the fall of 2000, was simply the complete removal of the Jews from this land.

With clarity comes closure. Israelis are unified as never before, and not just by the horrors perpetrated by Hamas. Their question is answered at long last. The brutality they once saw as a question turned out to be the answer, the purpose and end of much of Palestinian politics.

One can seek out the ideological roots of Hamas’s strategy of brutality in 20th-century decolonization movements or in theologies of Islamic renewal. But that history is mere background decor to the essential point — that this is a brutality that explodes against peace processes as much as against threats of annexation. No peace and no withdrawal will satisfy this impulse or grant Israeli Jews safety from the kind of wild, joyful hatred displayed on October 7.

And that brutality has now made itself too dangerous to be tolerated.

Hamas does not yet seem to realize how deep the Israeli public’s determination goes. Hamas’s only strategy for survival seems to be forcing the Israel Defense Forces to inflict so high a civilian toll in Gaza that the world demands a stop to the Israeli war machine.

But Israelis will be reeling from the images of October 7 for a long time to come. They have their answer, and from it flows a clarity of purpose that has been missing for the past three decades. The Israeli war machine will be implacable. Hamas will not survive.

A tragedy is about to unfold in Gaza made worse by the long learning curve it will take for Hamas to grasp the depth of Israeli resolve. It has robbed Israel of any other interest but its destruction. In the Israeli mind, any brutality Hamas *can* commit it *will* commit. And so it cannot be allowed to ever commit any act ever again.

And at the end of this long, dark path, this is, perhaps, the lone spark of optimism.

When Hamas is destroyed, Israel will finally have liberated the Palestinian cause from the bottomless brutality of its most fervent practitioners, from the shattering albatross of a violent decolonization movement that refuses to grasp its enemy has no colonial motherland to which they can return, and so from an addiction to cruelty without purpose or function.

Western supporters of Palestinians will no longer be forced to justify the purposeful massacre of babies in their rush to protect the Palestinian national movement from itself. And Israeli critics of Israeli policy will be free to focus on Israeli misdeeds without having to answer for Palestinian savagery even and especially in times of peacemaking.

A brutalized, embittered Israel will finally liberate the Palestinians from their own wrecked vision of their cause and their enemy, not out of magnanimity but out of Israeli necessity and pain. Hamas’s destruction alone won’t bring peace, but perhaps it isn’t too optimistic to hope it can mark the end of Palestine’s long collapse.

The gas-rich nation of Qatar has become a key intermediary in the fate of the 220 hostages currently held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip following the terror group’s deadly attack on Israel on October 7, once again putting the small Arabian Peninsula country in the spotlight.

The negotiations have also thrust Qatar into a delicate international balancing act as it maintains a relationship with those viewed as terrorist groups by the West, while trying to preserve its close security ties with the United States.

Under arrangements stemming from past Hamas ceasefire understandings with Israel, the gas-rich emirate of Qatar has in recent years paid the salaries of civil servants in the Gaza Strip, provided direct cash transfers to poor families and offered other kinds of humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza.

atar has also hosted Hamas’s political office in its capital of Doha for over a decade. Among officials based there is Khaled Mashaal, the former head of Hamas who survived a 1997 Israeli assassination attempt in Jordan that threatened to derail that country’s peace deal with Israel; and Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas’s current chief.

The US sanctioned Mashaal in 2003 for being “responsible for supervising assassination operations, bombings and the killing of Israeli settlers.” Washington sanctioned Haniyeh in 2018, saying he had “close links with Hamas’s military wing and has been a proponent of armed struggle, including against civilians.”

Mashaal, in an interview with Sky News this week, said hostages taken during Hamas’s attack on October 7 could be released if Israel stops its airstrikes — an incredibly unlikely suggestion as Israel prepares for a ground offensive inside the Gaza Strip.

The October 7 attack saw thousands of Hamas terrorists breach the Gaza border fence and conduct massacres in Israeli communities, taking the lives of some 1,400 people.

Israel’s military says at least 224 people, including foreigners, were believed captured by Hamas during the incursion and taken into Gaza. Four of those have been released, a mother and daughter on Friday and [two more](https://www.timesofisrael.com/freed-hamas-hostage-recounts-ordeal-slams-israeli-failures-speaks-well-of-captors/) on Monday

day. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, Pool)

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“Let them stop this aggression and you will find the mediators like Qatar and Egypt and some Arab countries and others will find a way to have them released and we’ll send them to their homes,” Mashaal said of the hostages.

Hosting the Hamas leaders has brought scrutiny to Qatar, both in the past and since the killings on October 7, the deadliest day in Israel’s history.

However, the Biden administration has repeatedly praised Qatar for its efforts in working to free the hostages and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Doha during his recent shuttle diplomacy trip in the region.

“Qatar is a longtime partner of ours who is responding to our request, because I think they believe that innocent civilians ought to be freed,” State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Monday.

Meanwhile, Qatar’s ruling emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, has channeled the wider anger in the Arab world over Israel’s operation in the Gaza Strip, which was launched after the attack inside Israel with the goal of eradicating Hamas and destroying their infrastructure.

According to unverified reports by the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry, over 5,700 Gazans have been killed in the Israeli air campaign. The number of terror operatives among them is unknownOn Tuesday, the emir [lashed out](https://www.timesofisrael.com/qatari-emir-a-hamas-ally-claims-israels-allies-granting-free-license-to-kill/) at Israel’s backers, accusing them of giving the country a “free license to kill” and declaring that “enough is enough.”

“It is untenable for Israel to be given an unconditional green light and free license to kill, nor is it tenable to continue ignoring the reality of occupation, siege, and settlement,” the Qatari leader said.

“It should not be allowed in our time to use cutting off water and preventing medicine and food as weapons against an entire population,” he added, referring to Israel’s “complete siege” of Gaza, as Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has termed the effort to raise the pressure on Hamas.

Israeli leaders have said it is unthinkable that the country should keep supplying goods and energy to the enclave following the onslaught, and with terrorists holding hundreds captive.

Placing the blame for regional insecurity on Israel, Al-Thani called for “an earnest regional and international stance vis-à-vis this dangerous escalation that we are witnessing, and which threatens the security of the region and the world.”

During Qatar’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup last year, Palestinian flags were prominently displayed and Israeli journalists were sometimes harassed.

Since Saturday, several dozen aid trucks have been granted passage into Gaza after being checked by Israel for weapons or other items that could be used by Hamas. But international organizations say some 100 a day are needed to meet the needs of the population.

Qatar, a peninsula sticking out like a thumb into the Persian Gulf with a small population and military, has always looked warily at its larger neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iran. It faced a years-long boycott by four Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia, over a political dispute, which Kuwait’s ruler at the time warned could have sparked a war

It also bore withering criticism from the US and others over its pan-Arab satellite news network Al Jazeera. It aired statements from the late al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden and has been providing nonstop coverage of the toll of Israel’s punishing airstrikes in this war with Hamas, including images of the dead and dying that have fueled demonstrations across the Middle East and wider world.

But those concerns about larger powers have seen Qatar balance the risks through its diplomacy and hosting of the forward headquarters of the US military’s Central Command at its sprawling Al-Udeid Air Base. The US considers Qatar as a major non-NATO ally and Doha has widening defense trade and security cooperation with America, including priority delivery for certain military sales.

The Al-Udeid base served as a key node in America’s chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, while Qatar also hosted the Taliban officials with whom Washington earlier negotiated to end the longest US war.

But Qatar’s negotiations have led to headaches in the past.

Most recently, Qatar agreed to have just under $6 billion in Iranian assets, once frozen in South Korea, transferred to Doha as part of a September prisoner swap between Tehran and the US. After the Hamas attack, Qatar and the US agreed not to act on any request from Tehran to access those funds for humanitarian goods as initially planned — at least for now.

That enraged sanctions-choked Iran and left Qatar “walking the tightrope of international relations,” said David B. Roberts, who has long studied Qatar as an associate professor at King’s College London and recently published the book “Security Politics in the Gulf Monarchies.”

“The reality is it is quite straightforward that so many senior government people in Israel and America want Qatar to have this role and… Qatar ultimately will be seen in a broadly positive light in trying to free these hostages,” Roberts said.

“If you do want this unique spot,” he added, “then you’re not signing yourself up for an easy life.”

Israeli drones, artillery, and tanks struck targets in Lebanon on Friday after an apparent drone was intercepted, shots were fired at a number of military posts on the northern frontier and an explosion damaged the border security barrier, the Israel Defense Forces said.

The incidents were the latest skirmishes around the Lebanese border amid fears that the Lebanon-based Hezbollah terror group will open up a second front amid the war triggered by last weekend’s unprecedented Hamas invasion from the Gaza Strip, which killed more than 1,300 Israelis, most of them civilians.

It also came amid new warnings from Hezbollah and Iran that the fighting could escalate into a regional conflict.

The IDF said an explosion caused minor damage to a section of the security wall on the Lebanon border near the northern kibbutz of Hanita. Troops responded with artillery fire toward Lebanon in the area.

The home Front Command briefly issued an alert of a possible infiltration near Kibbutz Hanita, but soon sounded an all-clear

Shortly after, several IDF posts along the border came under small arms fire

The army said tanks shelled a Hezbollah post on the border in response and shelled the source of the gunfire with artillery.

A short while later, rocket warning sirens sounded in Kibbutz Misgav Am. The IDF later said air defenses intercepted an “unidentified target” — believed to be a drone — that crossed into Israeli territory

In response to the apparent drone crossing into Israeli airspace, the IDF said it was carrying out drone strikes against Hezbollah sites.

Hezbollah claimed responsibility for targeting Israeli military posts on the Lebanon border with small arms fire, saying the attack came in response to “Israeli aggression,” in an apparent reference to artillery fire after a section of Israel’s border wall was damaged in an explosion.

An MSNBC reporter said that a cameraman with the Reuters news agency had been killed in the Israeli shelling.

Also Friday, the IDF declared some areas in the northern town of Metula a closed military zone.

The closed military zone only applies to sections of the town near the Lebanon border fence. Residents who have left the town in recent days were asked to not return.

“We are in continuous contact with army officials, hold daily situation assessment meetings and will continue to update on all developments,” the municipality said.

Security sources said the order came because of continuous riots and protests along the border by supporters of Hezbollah Palestinian terror groups.

Metula in recent days had recommended that residents leave the town amid the tensions.

**Threats from Iran and Hezbollah**

Amid the spiraling tensions, Hezbollah said Friday it would be “fully prepared” to join its Palestinian ally Hamas in the war against Israel when the time is right.

Hezbollah deputy chief Naim Qassem spoke as Hamas and Israel traded heavy fire for a seventh day.

Israel has retaliated for the unprecedented Hamas assault by striking Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip, killing some 1,800 people, according to the Hamas-run health ministry. The IDF also said it killed some 1,500 terrorists inside Israel.

“We, as Hezbollah, are contributing to the confrontation and will (continue) to contribute to it within our vision and plan,” Qassem told a pro-Palestinian rally in Beirut’s southern suburbs.

“We are fully prepared, and when the time comes for action, we will take it,” he said.

The official, whose remarks coincided with a visit to Beirut by Iran’s foreign minister, rebuffed calls for Hezbollah to stay out of the war.

Outreach by “major countries, Arab countries, and envoys from the United Nations, directly and indirectly, asking us not to interfere in the battle, will not affect us,” he said, adding: “Hezbollah knows its duties.”

In Beirut’s southern suburbs on Friday, more than 1,000 Hezbollah supporters rallied for Gaza, carrying Palestinian flags and banners that read: “May God protect you.”

“(Hassan) Nasrallah, strike Tel Aviv,” they chanted, addressing the leader of the Shiite Muslim group.

Iran also issued threats of a wider confrontation.

The United States must rein in Israel to avert a regional spillover of the war with Hamas, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said Friday in Beirut, adding Tehran was seeking to safeguard Lebanon’s security.

“America wants to give Israel a chance to destroy Gaza, and this is… a grave mistake,” Amir-Abdollahian said, adding, “If the Americans want to prevent the war in the region from developing, they must control Israel.”

Although Tehran has been a long-term backer of  Hamas, Iranian officials have been adamant the Islamic Republic had no involvement in the terror group’s weekend attack on Israel.

“Lebanon’s security and peace is important to us,” Amir-Abdollahian said after meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

“One of the goals of our trip is to stress on Lebanon’s security,” he added.

But he did not completely rule out the chance of an escalation.

During a news conference with his Lebanese counterpart later on Friday, he said: “If the systemic war crimes of the Zionist regime do not stop immediately, any possibility is conceivable.”

Also on Friday, Amir-Abdollahian met with Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah to discuss “potential outcomes” and the “positions that must be taken” in light of the latest developments, according to a Hezbollah statement.

Israel has traded fire with Hezbollah and allied Palestinian factions in Lebanon in recent days, although the tit-for-tat attacks have remained limited.

As Israel’s operation to eliminate Hamas and its military threat to the State of Israel continues into its third week, voices of criticism from the United Nations, human rights groups, and numerous other parties against the IDF’s campaign have inevitably grown louder.

The IDF has said its bombing campaign, launched after Hamas terrorists slaughtered over 1,400 people in southern Israel on October 7, has targeted, and killed, Hamas commanders and gunmen, as well as destroyed weapons warehouses, command and control centers, tunnels and numerous other assets that enable the terror organization to function.

But Hamas is deeply embedded in Gaza’s civilian infrastructure, a situation that creates severe complications for the IDF.

Explosions illuminate the sky during Israeli strikes on Gaza City on October 10, 2023. (MAHMUD HAMS / AFP)

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Alongside the blows dealt to Hamas, the army operation, dubbed Swords of Iron, has resulted in heavy casualties in Gaza, reportedly including large numbers of civilians. It has done severe damage to civilian infrastructure, with some neighborhoods undergoing catastrophic destruction.

The questions as to whether the Israeli army is acting lawfully will therefore continue to surface, and with greater intensity, together with the poisonous debate this issue raises on [social media](https://www.timesofisrael.com/x-takes-down-hundreds-of-accounts-with-hamas-ties-flags-content/), [university campuses](https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-israel-fights-back-after-hamas-massacre-us-colleges-firms-take-flak-over-responses/), and elsewhere across the globe. Already, [violent pro-Palestinian demonstrations](https://www.timesofisrael.com/historic-synagogue-in-tunisia-heavily-damaged-in-rioting-tied-to-israel-hamas-war/) have occurred in some countries alongside [a spike](https://www.timesofisrael.com/global-task-force-against-antisemitism-warns-of-danger-ahead-due-to-israel-hamas-war/) in global antisemitism

First, a few structural notes. The laws of armed conflict, also known as international humanitarian law, are governed primarily by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their additional protocols, including Protocol I which sets out the laws governing the protection of civilians, as well as customary international law.

Israel, along with all other states, is a party to the Geneva Conventions. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which provides protection to noncombatants under the terms of the Geneva Conventions, lists “Palestine” as a signatory party as well, meaning that both sides to this war are bound by the laws of armed conflict.

The International Criminal Court based in the Hague can prosecute serious violations of the Geneva Conventions that amount to war crimes, based on complaints submitted by international organizations, individuals, or parties to the court. The court itself can initiate examinations and investigations into possible violations of the laws of armed conflict.

The Palestinian Authority accepted the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2015, although Israel has not ratified the Rome Statute which established the ICC. Israel has, however, responded to allegations of war crimes submitted to the court by the Palestinian Authority against it.

Understanding the IDF’s codes of practice, the steps it takes to avoid civilian casualties, and circumstantial evidence from the war can paint a general picture as to the legality of the Israeli army’s operations.

### A democracy, governed by the rule of law

Israel declared war in response to the early morning October 7 invasion by Hamas terrorists in which they broke through the border fence under cover of thousands of rockets fired at Israel and rampaged murderously through southern communities, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and taking over 220 hostages into Gaza.

Entire families in their homes were among the victims, some of whom were burnt alive. Rapes, torture and other mutilations accompanied the slaughter. Some 260 people were mown down with gunfire and grenades at an outdoor music festival.

According to unverified numbers from the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza, believed to include its own terrorists, over 5,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel Defense Forces attacks since Israel began bombarding the Strip ahead of an expected ground offensive, with the declared aim of toppling and eradicating the terror group that rules the Strip.

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Determining whether the laws of armed conflict are being honored or violated while a war is raging, and when information about the circumstances of IDF strikes cannot be obtained, is incredibly difficult.



Gazans help the injured in Israeli airstrikes, October 10, 2023. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

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Screenshot of Hamas bodycam footage as terrorists approach an Israeli vehicle during the terror organization’s October 7 attack in southern Israel, released by the IDF and GPO. (Screenshot)

One crucial factor in understanding the overall legal context of the IDF’s operations is that Israel is a democratic country, meaning it is governed by the rule of law and its army’s campaigns are ultimately subject to review by Israeli courts.

Operations are conducted upon the direction of the government, specifically the security cabinet, and are overseen by the justice system, including the attorney general and the IDF’s military advocate general. All the IDF’s operations are governed by international law, and IDF orders include a requirement to abide by the Geneva Conventions.

As laid out on the IDF’s [official website (Hebrew)](https://www.idf.il/%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%A8%D7%99-%D7%99%D7%97%D7%99%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/%D7%94%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A7%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%98%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A6%D7%91%D7%90%D7%99%D7%AA/%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%9C%D7%A7%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%91%D7%99%D7%9F-%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%99/) and supported by comments made on background by experts in the field, the IDF itself provides its soldiers and commanders with education and training in international law through the Military Advocate General’s Corps (MAG Corps) School of Military Law.

In addition, the MAG Corps International Law Department provides the IDF with operational advice at various levels of command on international law in terms of what can and cannot be targeted, what weaponry is lawful, who may be detained, how such people can be held, and advice on humanitarian operations in the civilian population.

During times of war, the MAG Corps activates an operational law apparatus of military lawyers and lawyers in the IDF reserves who provide advice to operational forces and other units, including those in charge of humanitarian affairs.

The head of the MAG Corps, the military advocate general, is appointed by the defense minister in coordination with the IDF chief of staff but is professionally independent and subject only to the law.

The MAG Corps is subject to two levels of oversight. The first is the attorney general, who provides international law advice to the government including in times of conflict. The second is the Supreme Court, which may hear petitions against the MAG’s decisions and policies.

Allegations of violations of international law during hostilities are examined and investigated by independent military and civilian bodies, including police and prosecutors. Their decisions are also subject to review by the civil justice system and the Supreme Court.

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### Military targets among civilian infrastructure

Pnina Sharvit Baruch, who served as the head of the MAG International Law Department between 2003 and 2009, insists that the IDF only attacks military targets. She noted, however, that these may include residential buildings that are used by Hamas and other terror groups.

Because such buildings are being used for military purposes, they become lawful targets, says Sharvit Baruch, as laid out in treaties governing the laws of armed conflict such as Additional Protocol I Geneva Conventions and customary international law.

Hamas’s military capabilities are deeply entrenched within Gaza’s civilian infrastructure, and indeed underneath it in a vast network of tunnels, making the task of eliminating its military threat to Israel — as is Israel’s stated goal — without harming civilians extremely difficult.

Difficult, but not necessarily illegal.

### The principle of proportionality: Not a numbers game

One issue of critical importance here is that of proportionality, a concept that is very often misunderstood and misconstrued in a simplistic manner by looking at Israeli casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, and comparing them to those of the Palestinians.

Under the laws of armed conflict, an attack is considered disproportionate, and therefore illegal, “if the anticipated collateral damage to civilians and civilian objects would be excessive in relation to the military advantage expected from the attack,” says Sharvit Baruch, who now works as a researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

This means that if an attack would provide the IDF with a significant military advantage, such as taking out a Hamas commander, a key weapons facility, or similar, it could be legal even if it were deemed likely to cause civilian casualties, even heavy ones.

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Every individual attack has to be proportionate in this manner in order to be legal.

That said, the circumstances of a given war and the nature of the enemy has a bearing on how the concept of “military advantage” is determined, says Sharvit Baruch.

In the wake of its terror onslaught and the atrocities it committed on October 7, Hamas can justifiably be considered to be more dangerous and ruthless in terms of its paramilitary capabilities and its willingness to harm Israeli civilians and [commit war crimes](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-actions-are-war-crimes-could-constitute-genocide-international-law-experts/) than it was previously thought to be.

In such a light, the military advantage of killing a Hamas operative, destroying a command and control center, or attacking other targets can be given greater weight in the proportionality equation, meaning that the legally tolerable level of harm to civilians is also higher, says Sharvit Baruch.

“In my view, even if many civilians are killed, even in an excessive manner, it is not necessarily illegal, even if it is unfortunate,” she said.

Dr. Aurel Sari, an associate professor of Public International Law at the University of Exeter in the UK, points out another crucial point, that proportionality cannot be assessed on the basis of hindsight, but must be assessed on the basis of information that was available to the military commander at the time of the attack and prior to it.

“If it turns out that your information was wrong, that a weapon malfunctioned, or other unforeseen circumstances occurred that led to higher civilian casualties than originally anticipated, that is not a violation of the law,” said Sari, who also lectures and consults on international conflict law for NATO and the US and British militaries.

He said that in general terms, “The IDF is a professional force that adheres to the law of armed conflict,” and pointed to the quality legal advice it receives through the MAG Corps to help it comply with such laws.

### Ramping up the level of force

Sari did, however, express concern over some aspects of the IDF’s campaign.

“We have witnessed the very extensive destruction of residential areas in Gaza through aerial bombardment,” Sari said, although he noted that there were “undoubtedly” many “military objectives that are lawful military targets in Gaza” that the IDF may legally attack.

“However, given the sheer number of targets and the extensiveness of the destruction, questions have been raised whether all of the attacks are in fact directed against lawful military objectives. In a similar vein, there has been concern over the very high levels of incidental harm to civilians and whether this complies with the rule of proportionality,”

ari also said he believed the amount of ordinance, the pace of operations, and the number of sorties being conducted in the current campaign to be higher than in previous IDF campaigns in the Gaza Strip.

“It could be that all of this is directed against military targets and that in every case the demands of proportionality are being satisfied, but looking at the tempo of the operations, it appears difficult to sustain that.”

Sari acknowledged, however, that without access to the information possessed by the IDF and its commanders, it was impossible to know for certain.

Sharvit Baruch agreed that the IDF has increased the level of force it is using compared to previous conflicts with Hamas in Gaza, and said that “the level of destruction and the level of casualties are much higher than before.”

But she argued this was because the threat level is now much higher, contending that Hamas constitutes an existential threat to Israeli citizens in the Gaza border region and the country as a whole, especially when taken in combination with the threat posed by Hezbollah on Israel’s northern border and Iranian threats against Israel.

“Factually, Israel is operating with more force but that is because the circumstances demand it and in my view, it is legally justified to use more force because the level of the threat is so much greater.”

Similarly, in an article published on October 17, Benjamin Wittes, the editor in chief of the Lawfare publication and a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, wrote that it would be “a grave analytic and legal error to conflate an apparently large number of Palestinian civilian casualties in Gaza with war crimes.”

Wittes wrote that although some strikes “may be war crimes to the extent the civilian death was the result of intentional targeting,” other incidents in which Palestinian civilians have been killed “may reflect mere error, bad intelligence, or collateral damage permissible under the laws of war.”

On the same note, Sari said the proportionality calculation “is not a numbers game,” explaining for example that the military advantage of killing a senior Hamas commander could be deemed to justify incidental harm to a larger number of civilians than killing a Hamas foot soldier.

### Israel’s warnings to evacuate northern Gaza

Another factor with crucial bearing on the legality of a military strike that might harm civilians is the requirement to take feasible precautions to minimize such harm, said Sharvit Baruch.

Such precautions include warning the civilian population, although there is no legal obligation to warn of every attack. In previous rounds of conflict with Hamas, the IDF has issued specific warnings of impending strikes, but in the current operation, it has abandoned this practice in favor of general warnings to civilians to leave an area.

This is another example of how the nature of the IDF’s operations is different in the current conflict from that of previous rounds of fighting.

Sharvit Baruch insisted, however, that this is lawful, and pointed to IDF claims that Hamas has stopped some residents from heeding the Israeli army’s warnings and evacuating northern Gaza, even putting up roadblocks.

For the past two weeks, the IDF has [warned residents](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-warns-civilians-to-leave-northern-gaza-as-ground-invasion-looms/) of northern Gaza, with a population of approximately 1.1 million people, to evacuate to the southern part of the territory for safety during airstrikes and the looming ground offensive.

Those warnings, however, have been heavily criticized by some, including the United Nations, Amnesty International, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The ICRC said the warnings were “not compatible with international humanitarian law” when taken together with Israel’s decision to drastically cut the amount of water it supplies to Gaza and prevent the transfer of essential supplies.

“When military powers order people to leave their homes, all possible measures must be taken to ensure the population has access to basic necessities like food and water and that members of the same family are not separated,” the organization said.

Amnesty International charged that the IDF statements and leaflet drops on northern Gaza “cannot be considered an effective warning” and that they “may amount to forced displacement of the civilian population, a violation of international humanitarian law.”

Writing on the Articles of War website on October 15, Michael Schmitt, a professor of Public International Law at the University of Reading and a scholar at the US Military Academy at West Point, took issue with Amnesty International’s claims and said the assessments of the IDF’s warnings needed to evaluate the available options.

The alternatives are either “an urban assault into an area full of civilians” or “an evacuation into a place that is not fully prepared to accommodate them.”

Wrote Schmitt, “Regardless of the lawfulness of Israel’s siege-like actions, the simple fact is that civilians who head south will be safer.”

It was, therefore, “bewildering,” he said, “that humanitarian organizations are not encouraging the civilian population to move away from what will be a destructive and deadly urban battle.”

As to the claims of forced displacement, Schmitt noted that the ICRC’s own rules say that “displacement” is legal if the security of civilians requires evacuation, adding that “it is not only permissible to move civilians when their safety can be enhanced but also a requirement when feasible.”

Wittes likewise rejected the criticism of Israel’s warnings, saying that the IDF could not be criticized for attacking Hamas in Gaza amid the presence of hundreds of thousands of civilians and at the same time be banned from having those civilians move away to avoid harming them.

### The siege of Gaza

He was critical, however, of aspects of Israel’s siege on Gaza, saying that cutting off water was “indefensible.”

Likewise, Sari said that although siege warfare is not an unlawful method of warfare as such, Israel’s decision to cut the water supply and withhold the transfer of essential items “is difficult to justify – and if it cannot be justified, it is not lawful.”

On October 9, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declared that there would be “no electricity, no food, no fuel” going into Gaza, and Israel imposed a total siege on the territory that day. Supply of some water was restarted on October 15, while the entry into Gaza of general humanitarian aid has also begun again, albeit in a limited way.

The war in Gaza and the operation being conducted by the IDF in the territory is highly complex in terms of the challenges facing Israel’s armed forces to eliminate Hamas’s military capabilities while avoiding harm to civilians and thereby complying with the laws of armed conflict.

There are numerous facets to the operation, each of which has its own legal obligations and concerns. Given how deeply Hamas is embedded and ensconced within Gaza’s civilian population, and given the severe threat it poses to Israeli civilians and the country’s national security as a whole, making correct decisions in every aspect of this war is very difficult.

Sari contends, though, that it Israel must try its utmost to do so in order to live up to its own values, preserve its moral legitimacy, and ultimately maintain the backing of its allies.

“Complying with international law is mandatory, but such compliance also reflects the values and principles of Israel as a democracy and distinguishes it from its adversaries,” Sari said.

“In addition, compliance with international law is also in Israel’s interest, as it will be critical to maintain the international backing it has received,” he said.

Standing on rubble under the blackened façade of her apartment building in Netivot, Liora Touito watches neighbors load two suitcases into a car.

The site took a rocket hit that killed three neighbors and torched Touito’s yard.

The mother of four would have liked to join the stream of locals who have temporarily left this city of 35,000 residents situated only 11 kilometers (seven miles) from the Gaza border. But Touito is so strapped for cash that she can’t even accept the offers to host her for free courtesy of municipalities and private citizens who are putting up the temporarily displaced

“The 10th approaches,” she said on Sunday, referencing the date when her credit card bill is due. “I work at a supermarket, and I barely make ends meet as it is. If I don’t work, I can’t pay rent or feed the kids.”

At least 1,300 Israelis have died in the ongoing hostilities with Hamas in Gaza, most of them during a shock incursion by some 1,500 terrorists who on October 7 murdered Israelis en masse, perpetrating atrocities that have shocked the world. Israel has unleashed its artillery and air force on Gaza, killing at least 2,000 people according to Palestinian sources, amid anticipation of a ground invasion to destroy Gaza’s Hamas rulers

Touito’s predicament is not uncommon for how the poverty of many in the battered cities of the western Negev has compounded their suffering during the region’s 22 years under threat from Gaza rockets. Yet these challenges have neither stopped the city’s growth nor broken many locals’ spirit and faithThe death of Touito’s neighbors – Raphael Fahimi, his son-in-law Netanel Maskelchi and Maskelchi’s 14-year-old son, Raphael Meir Maskelchi – may have had something to do with poverty, too, Touito says.

“Because of thefts, many here keep butane tanks for cooking in their balconies instead of outside. The rocket ignited the butane. That’s what killed them,” said Touito, whose eldest daughter is suffering from PTSD

The building where the rocket hit has a shelter but it’s unusable because the residents have turned it into a storage place.

“People have large families here and they store and hoard for years things like furniture and mattresses to avoid having to buy new,” Touito explains. “I want them to clear the shelter but they won’t listen to me.”

Touito and her children sleep at her boyfriend’s home, which has a shelter

Netivot, where the average monthly salary of about NIS 9,500 ($2,380) is roughly 30% lower than the national figure, has some more affluent neighborhoods composed of semi-detached houses and modern apartment buildings. Unlike the projects in the city’s center, the fancier neighborhoods have emptied out, according to Aviel Zaguri, a 27-year-old father of four.People in richer neighborhoods tend to have relatives who can host them, cars to get to work with, or jobs they can do remotely. “It’s pretty empty in the nicer neighborhoods,” Zaguri said while standing in the city’s dusty center, which has been echoing for days with the thuds of ballistic launches on both sides of the Gaza border.

Thousands of people from Sderot, Ofakim, Netivot, Ashkelon and beyond have left their homes amid the countless Hamas rocket attacks that have pummeled Israel over the past nine days, killing several people.

ome Netivot residents say the city enjoys divine protection as it’s the burial place of Yoram Michael Abargel, a rabbi who died in 2015. He is revered by thousands of disciples who pray regularly at a synagogue in his memory built near his grave. Even now, it draws pilgrims and worshipers at all hours.

So does the Netivot grave of Israel Abuhatzeira, better known as the Baba Sali, a Morocco-born rabbi whose followers say he performed miracles before his 1984 death.

**“Netivot could have easily had a situation like they had in Ofakim,” Yehuda Oshert, 57, said. He was referencing the slaying on October 7 of dozens of residents in a nearby city. “But the saintly sages confused the terrorists who wanted to enter Netivot and [protected] us,” Oshert, a father of three, added.**

**Oshert and his wife are staying out of principle. “I’ve never folded, never left, never ceded an inch to those animals, and I’m not about to start now,” he said defiantly**

**Netivot, which is surrounded by kibbutzim and moshavim, underlines the juxtaposition of what some call “first and second Israel” — the predominantly Ashkenazi, cultural elite and the largely Sephardic, underprivileged urbanites. The divide extends to the religious and political realms, with “second Israel” being more devout than the other group and generally likelier to vote for right-wing, religious parties.**

**The 10-month-long wave of protests against the right-wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has accentuated those divides. But the terrorist attack of October 7 has “set aside” those differences, Oshert said, reflecting the mindset of many on both sides of the internal divide.**

**“This is a sign that divided, we will fall,” he said. “When I pray at the gravesite [of Abargel] I pray for everyone: Tel Aviv folks, Netivot folks, even kibbutzniks,” he said with a wink, referencing the stereotype of the staunch secularism in that demographic.**

**Yet the differences linger, and they are being revisited even as families from across Israel — first and second — bury their dead and prepare for a long and deadly war.**

**Rachel Edery, a woman from Ofakim who became a national** [**icon**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-ofakim-one-womans-graceful-bravery-offers-precious-solace-to-a-grieving-nation/) **for how she used her instinct for hospitality to survive being taken hostage with her husband by five Hamas terrorists, verbalized what many have been thinking.**

**“We were punished by God. They disrupted the prayers of Jews on Yom Kippur, like savages. So we got savagery paid back one hundred times over,” she told a neighbor, referencing a** [**row over public Orthodox worship in Tel Aviv**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/annual-yom-kippur-mass-prayer-tests-the-limits-of-tel-avivs-vaunted-liberalism/) **that had polarized Israeli society in the days leading up to the attack.**

**Survivors on the other side of the political debate are also politicizing the tragedy.**

**“Where are all the people who called us traitors?” Sofie Berzon MacKie, a survivor from Kibbutz Be’eri, an epicenter of the wholesale murder of Israelis during the Hamas terror onslaught, asked in an interview on Channel 12 on Wednesday**

**“We the leftists are the traitors?” she asked, repeating a frequent slur used against the anti-judicial overhaul protesters and leftists in general. “They are the traitors, the people whose salaries I pay and left me to die,” Berzon MacKie, an artist who was born in the United Kingdom, said as she cried.**

**Back in Netivot, Aviel Zaguri is staying put. He didn’t flinch as inbound rockets that hit a few miles from Netivot send loud thuds across the plains of the western Negev. He stood at sunset outside his yeshiva and looked up at the spectacle that lit up the desert sky over Netivot each night: Iron Dome rounds hunting and destroying rockets bound for the area’s Israeli towns.**

**“My wife thought about going to Jerusalem, but we decided it’s not much safer. And frankly, it’s such a hassle moving in with relatives when you have four small kids that staying under fire feels easier.”**

**Zaguri’s children are accustomed to the alarms and the thuds, he said. “We’ve raised our children into this. Our twins, age 5, asked what the thuds are. I told them: Arabs in Gaza want to kill us but God will watch over us if we watch over ourselves and His commandments.**

UNITED NATIONS — The UN Security Council delayed until Tuesday morning a vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution calling for a halt to hostilities in Gaza that would allow for urgently needed aid deliveries to reach a massive number of civilians as members intensified negotiations to try to avoid another veto by the United States.

The council said Monday’s vote, which had been scheduled for 5 p.m., would not take place, and diplomats said negotiations were taking place to get the United States, Israel’s closest ally, to abstain or vote “yes” on the resolution.

The draft on the table Monday morning called for an “urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities” for humanitarian access to deliver aid. But this language is expected to be watered down to a “suspension” of hostilities or something possibly weaker to satisfy the Americans, the diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity because discussions have been private

The US [vetoed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-vetoes-un-security-council-resolution-demanding-immediate-gaza-ceasefire/) a Security Council resolution on December 8 that was backed by almost all council members and dozens of other nations demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on December 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

The importance of a Security Council resolution is that it is legally binding, but in practice, many parties choose to ignore the council’s requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, but they are a significant barometer of world opinion

A key issue is how to implement and sustain a desperately needed aid operation. Human Rights Watch [accused Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/human-rights-watch-claims-israel-starving-gaza-civilians-as-a-method-of-warfare/) on Monday of deliberately starving Gaza’s population by blocking the delivery of water, food, and fuel, a method of warfare that it described as a war crime. Israel responded by describing HRW as having “no moral basis to talk about what’s going on in Gaza” as the rights group did not condemn the massacre by the Hamas terror group that provoked the current war.

The United Nations’ food agency reported on December 14 that 56 percent of Gaza’s households were experiencing “severe levels of hunger,” up from 38% two weeks earlier

The draft resolution that was being considered by the 15 council members on Monday recognizes that civilians in Gaza don’t have access to sufficient food, water, sanitation, electricity, telecommunications, and medical services “essential for their survival.” Also, it would express the council’s “strong concern for the disproportionate effect that the conflict is having on the lives and well-being of children, women, and other civilians in vulnerable situations.”

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Israel launched its war on Hamas following the terror group’s murderous onslaught on southern Israel on October 7, in which 3,000 terrorists slaughtered some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, amid acts of brutality including rapes, and took another approximately 240 people hostage, more than 100 of whom it is still holding captive.

The Hamas-run Gaza health ministry says more than 19,000 people in the Strip have been killed in the ensuing operation. The Gaza death toll cannot be independently verified and also includes those killed in failed Palestinian rocket launches. The IDF says it has killed over 7,000 Hamas operatives in Gaza.

Israel says it makes every effort to avoid civilian casualties. But it points to the Hamas practice of locating military infrastructure — rocket launchers, weapons stores, command centers — next to, inside and underneath residential buildings, hospitals, schools and mosques.

The proposed Security Council resolution reiterates its demand that all parties comply with international humanitarian law, especially protecting civilians and the infrastructure critical for their survival including hospitals, schools, places of worship, and UN facilities.

The draft, obtained by The Associated Press, demands the parties to the conflict — Hamas and Israel — fulfill their obligations under international humanitarian law and enable “the immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale directly to the Palestinian civilian population throughout the Gaza Strip.”

It “calls for an urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access” in Gaza and also “firmly condemns all violations of international humanitarian law, including all indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects, all violence and hostilities against civilians, and all acts of terrorism.”

The draft also demands the immediate and unconditional release of all Hamas-held hostages.The draft confirms its “unwavering commitment to the vision of the two-state solution,” and stresses “the importance of unifying the Gaza Strip with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority.”

The draft is being negotiated by the United Arab Emirates, which is the Arab representative on the Security Council, and requests that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres establish an expeditious mechanism to monitor all humanitarian shipments to Gaza by land, sea, and air.

In a letter sent on Monday to the president of the Security Council, seen by AFP, Guterres mentions three options for implementing a November 15 resolution calling for humanitarian “pauses” of a few days to allow aid into the Palestinian territory.

Noting that “the conditions for the effective delivery of humanitarian aid no longer exist,” the secretary general’s first option is to reinforce the presence of UN humanitarian personnel on the ground to enable a “more robust United Nations presence on the ground.”

Secondly, he suggests a mission of the UN or third-party civilian observers.

And finally, to monitor the observance of “humanitarian pauses/cease-fires, United Nations unarmed military observers could be deployed,” he wrote, noting that all three options would require “clear mandates” from the Security Council.

Since the start of the war between Israel and Hamas, the Security Council has been under fire, having only managed to adopt a text calling for “humanitarian pauses” in mid-NovemberFive other draft resolutions were rejected, two of them due to US vetoes.

US President Joe Biden has since exhibited growing impatience with Israel, warning that its ally risks losing the support of the international community for its “indiscriminate” bombardment of the Gaza Strip, while at same time Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, on a visit to Israel this week, assured Israeli officials that the US would not dictate the “timelines or terms” of the war.

The Biden administration declined to say how it viewed the latest Security Council resolution text.

“We are always trying to get to a place where there’s language that we agree with, that other Security Council members agree with,” US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters.

“But right now we’re in the middle of the negotiation process. I wouldn’t want to speculate.”

Israel has already insisted that a long-term ceasefire is unacceptable, as it would leave Hamas still in charge of Gaza and still holding the hostages it abducted from Israel.

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israel and the United States agree on how the Israel-Hamas war started — with the Gaza-ruling terror group’s savage October 7 massacres in southern Israel. They agree on how it should end — with the elimination of Hamas.

But there are differences over how to get there, which are becoming more pronounced.

On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden openly criticized Israel’s conduct in the war.

“Israel’s security can rest on the United States, but right now it has more than the United States,” Biden said at a fundraiser at a Washington hotel convened by Lee “Rosy” Rosenberg, a major donor to Democrats and pro-Israel causes. “It has the European Union, it has Europe, it has most of the world,” he said. “But they’re starting to lose that support by indiscriminate bombing that takes place.”

Over 18,000 Gazans have been killed so far in the fighting, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry — a figure that cannot be verified and includes terrorists as well as civilians killed by errant Palestinian rocket fire. Israel says it has killed 7,000 Hamas operatives.

Over 1,200 people were killed in Israel on October 7, most of them civilians, when thousands of Hamas-led terrorists stormed the border and launched a murder and torture spree with monstrous brutality, raping women and girls, mutilating corpses and burning entire families alive. The terrorists abducted roughly 240 more people, taking them as hostages to the Gaza Strip.

The massacre led to Israel’s current military campaign, in which 115 IDF troops have so far been killed.

But there are stark differences between Israel and the United States over what happens the day after the war ends. Does Israel stay in the Gaza Strip? If so, for how long? And who takes its place?

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“Yes, there is disagreement about ‘the day after Hamas,’ and I hope that we will reach agreement here as well,” Netanyahu said Tuesday in a statement, describing what he called an “intensive dialogue” he had just completed with Biden.

Netanyahu made clear what the differences are: Biden has pushed for the Palestinian Authority — which governs Palestinian population centers in the West Bank — to [take control of Gaza](https://apnews.com/article/biden-revitalized-palestinian-authority-israel-hamas-war-bf8defe81079d6e6371f228157f9be10). Netanyahu rejected that idea, referencing the Oslo Accords, the 1993 agreement that created the PA, which is led by the Fatah Party.

“I will not allow Israel to repeat the mistake of Oslo,” Netanyahu said. He referenced longstanding Israeli complaints about the PA: that it glorifies violence against Israelis and pays stipends to convicted Palestinian terrorists in Israeli prisons.

“After the great sacrifice of our civilians and our soldiers, I will not allow the entry into Gaza of those who educate for terrorism, support terrorism and finance terrorism,” he said. “Gaza will be neither Hamastan nor Fatahstan.”

Netanyahu has [said Israel will retain security control of the Gaza Strip](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-idf-will-control-gaza-after-war-rejects-notion-of-international-force/) after the war, though he has not elaborated on who will govern its day-to-day affairs or how long the Israeli security presence would last. That’s frustrating the Biden administration, said David Makovsky, a fellow with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy think tank, which has ties with the Israeli and US governments.

“The Americans want to know, like, OK, you have a military strategy. I get that. And maybe a very reasonable one, but tell me how it leads to political outcomes? The outcome is no Hamas. Okay. That’s good. That’s necessary. But is it sufficient?’”

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Here’s a look at the outcomes the United States, Israel and other actors are talking about.

**Will the Palestinian Authority govern Gaza?**

The Biden administration, for several weeks after Hamas’s massacre, talked about bringing the Palestinian Authority into the Gaza Strip.

“We must also work on the affirmative elements to get to a sustained peace,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in Tokyo during a summit of the G7 industrial giants on November 8. “These must include the Palestinian people’s voices and aspirations at the center of post-crisis governance in Gaza. It must include Palestinian-led governance and Gaza unified with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority.”

Netanyahu has emphatically counted out any PA role in the Gaza Strip, pointing to its continued payments to the families of jailed and killed terrorists and what he says is continued incitement in its textbooks and media.

That may explain why Blinken has been more circumspect in recent statements, in which he has envisioned the establishment of an independent Palestinian state uniting Gaza and the West Bank but hasn’t named the Palestinian Authority.

“When the major military operation is over, this is not over, because we have to have a durable, sustainable peace, and we have to make sure that we’re on the path to a durable, sustainable peace,” Blinken said Sunday on CNN’s State of the Union. “From our perspective, I think from the perspective of many around the world, that has to lead to a Palestinian state.”

Netanyahu is not the only obstacle to such an outcome. Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, is not too eager to be seen as assuming control of the Gaza Strip on the heels of an Israeli invasion. Polls show that Abbas, who hasn’t run in (or won) an election in nearly two decades, has low approval ratings among Palestinians.

“I will not return on top of an Israeli tank,” [the Associated Press quoted Abbas as telling his confidants last month.](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-11-1-2023-blinken-netanyahu-d57766fd8e55500ff6f16b78b3560d51)

The PA itself is seen as corrupt and weakened by decades of cooperating with Israeli security measures in the parts of the West Bank it governs. Some major West Bank cities, such as Jenin, are home to large concentrations of militant groups.

But a [paper published this week](https://israelpolicyforum.org/starting-from-the-ground-up-u-s-policy-options-for-post-hamas-gaza/) by Israel Policy Forum (IPF) scholars Michael Koplow and Shira Efron says the end of the war is an opportunity for Israel to expand its relationship with the PA — and demand that it undergo reforms that address Israel’s concerns. IPF has long advocated for a two-state solution.

“Despite hopes to the contrary, no other players in the international community are willing to entertain long-term commitments to Gaza, let alone ruling the Strip, leaving the PA as the only viable option,” Efron and Koplow write.

**Will Netanyahu preserve his hardline coalition?**

Efron and Koplow added, however, that Netanyahu is rejecting cooperation with the PA in Gaza because of pressure from far-right parties in his coalition. Those parties, they said, wield an “absolute veto” over strengthening the PA.

Regarding Netanyahu’s political interests, Makovsky was blunter.

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“He can’t say the word ‘PA’ — he can’t say it,” Makovsky said. “If the government seems completely shut down over being able to talk about the day after, that’s a function of the politics.”

On Tuesday, Biden appeared to suggest that it was time for Netanyahu to cut off his far-right partners, whom the president has long reviled.

“Bibi’s got a tough decision to make,” he said at the fundraising event, using Netanyahu’s nickname. “This is the most conservative government in Israel’s history,” that “doesn’t want a two-state solution.”

He appeared to hope Netanyahu might bring in the center-left opposition and drop the far-right. That’s not going to happen as long as the latter is ready to keep Netanyahu in office and shield him from the political consequences of the October 7 onslaught, said Nimrod Novik, another IPF scholar and a member of the executive committee of Commanders for Israel Security, which also favors a two-state outcome.

“The longer [the war] is, the farther the trauma of October 7,” Novilk said. “The longer it is, the farther the investigations of the responsibility for it all. Maybe people will forget, maybe something good will happen and he’ll get credit for it.”

Jonathan Schanzer, a vice president with the right-leaning Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said Netanyahu had every incentive to pursue the war until victory somewhat repairs his legacy shattered by October 7.

“He said ‘everybody will have to give answers’ [about what went wrong] when the war is over,” Schanzer said. “And he’s hoping that he can postpone that discussion until such a time that events on the ground will have swung in his favor.”

**Will Israel reoccupy Gaza?**

Although Netanyahu has discussed maintaining control of security in Gaza, he has not yet said the word “occupation”: For one thing, it would set off a firestorm at home. Before Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, many Israelis remember weeks of military reserve duty spent occupying the dangerous strip of land, and the costs it incurred in lives and resources.

For another, the Biden administration has said indefinite Israeli occupation of Gaza is not an option.



IDF soldiers fighting in Gaza pose with a sign that reads: ‘Gush Katif: Returning Home.’ (Aviel Tucker)

At the G7 summit in Tokyo last month, Blinken rejected every possible iteration of occupation that has apparently bubbled up under consideration by Netanyahu, according to leaks to the Israeli media. These include resettlement of Israelis in Gaza, military occupation, “buffer zones” that Israel would control along Gaza’s border, a return to blockading the strip — which was the status in place until October 6 — and the removal of a portion of the Palestinians, an action that would bolster charges of ethnic cleansing against Israel.

“The only way to ensure that this crisis never happens again is to begin setting the conditions for durable peace and security, and to frame our diplomatic efforts now with that in mind,” Blinken said. “The United States believes key elements should include no forcible displacement of Palestinians from Gaza — not now, not after the war. No use of Gaza as a platform for terrorism or other violent attacks.  No reoccupation of Gaza after the conflict ends. No attempt to blockade or besiege Gaza. No reduction in the territory of Gaza.”

Many Palestinian commentators have focused their attention on the Gaza death toll over the past two months. But Diana Buttu, a former Palestinian negotiator, [wrote in The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/12/opinion/gaza-israel-palestinians-plans.html) on Tuesday that an ongoing Israeli occupation of Gaza would be the worst possible option.

“The future of Gaza — like that of the West Bank — is for Palestinians to decide,” she wrote. “That is the essence of self-determination. The international community must not continue to place Israel first, as has been done for decades.”

She added, “Palestinians must live freely, without the faintest sense of an Israeli noose around our necks.”

**Will Israel’s Arab partners play a role in Gaza’s future?**

Blinken has shuttled between Arab capitals for weeks seeking buy-in for the postwar scenario. But in public comments after meeting foreign ministers from Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as a Palestinian Authority senior official, he was vague about what that scenario involves — beyond expressing hope for a Palestinian state.

Behind the scenes, [reports have said](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/watch-blinken-meets-with-arab-leaders-to-discuss-gazas-future-amid-tensions-over-israel-hamas-war), he has been more explicit, seeking pledges of funding for whatever form the government of Gaza takes after the war. He has also weighed asking Arab countries to commit troops to Gaza to help maintain the peace.

Arab states, [which have been calling for a ceasefire,](https://www.reuters.com/world/blinken-says-discussed-future-gaza-with-arab-foreign-ministers-2023-12-01/) have not bitten at that offer, for myriad reasons: They, like Israel, distrust Abbas, who has gained a reputation for corruption and fecklessness. And while four Arab states have normalized relations with Israel in recent years, they are not ready to join with it in a military effort to keep Gaza calm.

According to [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?mod=middle-east_news_article_pos2), the United Arab Emirates, which has cultivated increasingly close ties with Israel in recent years, said it would help with the reconstruction of Gaza only if there’s progress toward a two-state solution.

“We need to see a viable two-state solution plan, a road map that is serious before we talk about the next day and rebuilding the infrastructure of Gaza,” said the Emirati ambassador to the United Nations, Lana Nusseibeh.

In their paper, Efron and Koplow propose a US-led rehabilitation of Gaza that melds Arab buy-in with reconstituting the Palestinian Authority in the territory. Preparing for that future, they wrote, needs to begin even as the fighting is ongoing.

“Stabilizing Gaza, resuming necessary services, rebuilding infrastructure, and preventing the return of Hamas — assuming that Israel is successful in removing it from effective power — will require a concerted effort from multiple stakeholders: Israel, the Palestinians, Middle Eastern countries, the international community, and particularly the United States,” said the paper.

Ghaith al-Omari, a former adviser to Palestinian officials and a fellow at the Washington Institute, [told The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/12/03/palestinian-authority-gaza/) last week that bringing in the PA was a prerequisite to getting other Arab countries to play a role in postwar Gaza.

Arab nations, “to even be able to engage with us, they need that framing, the two-state solution framing and the transitional framing,” he told the Post. “Because this way they can always claim, ‘We’re doing this to support the Palestinians.’”

National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir on Monday demanded that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu add a minister to the three-person war cabinet, accusing those already on the panel overseeing the war against Hamas of having harbored misconceptions that enabled the terror group to carry out its devastating attack on October 7.

Ben Gvir demanded that the additional member not be from the premier’s Likud party or Benny Gantz’s National Unity, which left the opposition to join an emergency government in the wake of the Hamas assault that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, the vast majority of them civilians.

“As a member of the coalition, a senior minister in the government, and a member of the cabinet, I accepted your unilateral decision on the composition of the ‘narrow cabinet’ which does not include me — the national security minister,” the leader of the far-right Otzma Yehudit party wrote in a letter to Netanyahu.

“I do not intend to confront you on the matter, despite the fact that it is appropriate that the position of the huge number of voters who put their trust in us and asked us to represent them should be heard in the limited cabinet,” Ben Gvir wrote.

Five National Unity lawmakers joined Netanyahu’s cabinet shortly after the Hamas massacre and Israel’s subsequent declaration of war, forming a national emergency government meant to add decades of high-level security experience to the management of the war and temper far-right influence.

The war cabinet is made up of Netanyahu, Gantz and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Gantz is a former IDF chief of staff and defense minister, and Gallant a former commander of the IDF Southern Command.

National Unity MK Gadi Eisenkot, also a former IDF chief of staff, and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, a Netanyahu confidant, are observers to the cabinet.

Netanyahu’s coalition already included the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties, along with far-right Religious Zionism and Ben Gvir’s Otzma Yehudit.

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“I hereby demand that a member or even an observer be added to the cabinet,” Ben Gvir wrote, adding that Netanyahu should be the one to select the person.

He stipulated that the additional member of the war cabinet can be any coalition minister, “provided that another voice is heard, which is not part of the misconception we have been dragged into for years.”

Ben Gvir said that all the ministers currently on the war cabinet were part of what he termed the “concept camp,” those, he explained, “who for years claimed that Hamas was deterred, that payments to a terrorist organization would bring peace, those who fostered the policy of containment and sowed illusions that led to our current situation.”

Israel allowed Qatar to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars in cash delivered by hand to Hamas authorities, in order to alleviate the dire economic circumstances in the Strip.

Questions about the war cabinet were already raised when Shas party leader MK Aryeh Deri attended its first meeting days after the attack. Deri, who is not a minister after the High Court of Justice ruled he cannot hold such an office due to his past criminal convictions, was reportedly invited to attend by Netanyahu. The move was said to draw anger from other ministers who were not included. Netanyahu reportedly explained that Deri’s presence was a one-off for just that meeting as it covered issues in which he had some experience, according to the Kan public broadcaster.

Ben Gvir has had a rocky relationship with the security establishment despite his ministry overseeing the police force. He was [repeatedly left out](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ben-gvir-again-excluded-from-top-level-security-meeting/) of top-level security meetings in the past, with insider sources telling media it was because he would disrupt the gatherings with unhelpful hardline suggestions. There were also reportedly concerns that Ben Gvir, whom critics accuse of seeking media attention, would leak details of meetings compromising sensitive operations.

Ben Gvir’s assignation of blame for the catastrophic Hamas assault in part to Netanyahu came after several senior defense officials have publicly assumed responsibility for the security failures that enabled Hamas to send over 2,500 gunmen across the heavily guarded border with Gaza into Israel and rampage for hours, overrunning communities and army posts, and slaughtering men, women, and children. In addition, at least 222 people, including the elderly, parents with young children, and babies, were abducted and dragged back to Gaza as captives.

The attack came under cover of a barrage of thousands of rockets at towns and cities across Israel. Hamas has kept up the rocket attacks on central and southern Israel. Some 200,000 people have been displaced as they flee the attacks.

Israel responded by vowing to destroy Hamas and began intensive strikes on terror targets in Gaza ahead of an expected ground invasion.

Last week the head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, Maj. Gen Aharon Haliva, said he [bears responsibility](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-intel-chief-says-he-bears-full-responsibility-for-not-warning-of-hamas-attack/) for intelligence failures that did not warn of the assault. He followed the head of the Shin Bet security agency and IDF chief of staff, who made similar remarks in the preceding days.

A handful of ministers have acknowledged and taken responsibility for the failures that contributed to the Hamas onslaught, including Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, Education Minister Yoav Kisch and Culture and Sports Minister Miki Zohar.

National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi admitted the government “did not fulfill our mission.”

Pressed about the question of Netanyahu, who has served as prime minister for 12 of the past 15 years, taking direct responsibility for the situation, Hanegbi said, “The moment will come when everyone will deal with it, former and current prime ministers, army chiefs, defense ministers.”

The Ynet outlet reported Monday that there are two ministers who are reconsidering their positions within the government due to a sense of responsibility for the attack. In addition, the outlet said several coalition MKs are also having doubts about the situation. According to the report, which did not cite sources or name any of the alleged lawmakers, the MKs are also frustrated at the continuing disarray in government ministries since long before the war, with many key positions not filled due to infighting among officials.

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One unnamed MK told Ynet, “We should have fought harder against the rot. The situation that we have reached is unbelievable. It simply must not be allowed to continue.”

The report cited a recent survey by Nimrod Nir, a political psychologist at the Hebrew University who sampled the opinions of 1,443 Jewish Israelis over several days since the war broke out.

He found that 75 percent hold Netanyahu responsible for the events of October 7. Likewise, over 70% saw Defense Minister Gallant as responsible. Among respondents, 66% felt that Netanyahu should resign when the conflict is over, and just 18% said he could stay. Even in Netanyahu’s own Likud party, over half believe he should go and just 32% felt he can continue to lead, the report said. Public opinion was 64% in favor of calling fresh elections, which would be the sixth round of voting in the past six years as repeated elections failed to produce a stable government.

Joe Biden seems to have found his stride in the wake of the October 7 attacks.

Facing dreadful [polls](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/latest_polls/2024/) back home, and growing whispers in his own party about the wisdom of putting the 80-year-old up for reelection, Biden has suddenly become the right man at the right time.

During his six-hour visit to Israel on Wednesday, Biden spoke forcefully, and often eloquently, about the horrors of the Hamas assault on Israeli towns and kibbutzim; on the painful associations the slaughter raised for Jews around the world; on America’s moral and material support for its grieving ally.

It wasn’t only Biden, the leader of the free world, who showed up for Israel in Tel Aviv. It was also “Uncle Joe,” the folksy and avuncular Irish-American local politician with an ability to connect with seemingly everyone, from world leaders to the common man. He transformed the grave mien of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Issac Herzog into smiles moments after stepping off his plane. He hugged Rachel Edri as she regaled him with her tale of feeding terrorists cookies in her home until they were eliminated by a SWAT team. And he drew on his own pain of losing suddenly his wife and baby daughter in a car crash to offer a heartfelt message of comfort to devastated Israelis.

But throughout Biden’s public statements and meetings, there was an unmistakable refrain of anxiety over the course that the war could take

And Biden has good reason to be apprehensive.The world is watching, he told Netanyahu in front of the cameras. “Israel has a value set like the United States does and other democracies, and they’re looking to see what we’re going to do.”

It’s not that the US is exactly concerned about IDF tactics per se. When US forces have been forced to fight against entrenched enemies in Middle Eastern cities, civilian casualties are inevitably high. US-led coalition and Iraqi forces killed thousands of civilians as they wrested control of west Mosul from ISIS fighters in 2017.

The war crimes accusations from international organizations and the response from the US military were reminiscent of the discourse around Israeli operations against terrorists embedded among civilians.

“With their crude targeting abilities, [US-backed forces’] weapons wreaked havoc in densely populated west Mosul, where large groups of civilians were trapped in homes or makeshift shelters,” [wrote](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/07/at-any-cost-civilian-catastrophe-in-west-mosul-iraq/) Amnesty International. “Even in attacks that seem to have struck their intended military target, the use of unsuitable weapons or failure to take other necessary precautions resulted in needless loss of civilian lives and in some cases constituted disproportionate attacks.”

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An Air Force general [responded](https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/07/12/536870827/amnesty-says-u-s-led-coalition-may-have-committed-war-crimes-in-mosul) to the charges with a defense that could have come from the mouth of an Israeli officer: “We use the most precise and [discriminating] weapons that we can ever use and are available in the world to avoid targeting civilians.”

He stressed that civilian casualties are “going to happen, just based on the nature of the war, but I can tell you that to be effective we’ve got to support the Iraqi security forces and that’s what we’ve done.”

What Biden is actually concerned about is the fact that Israeli operations are given disproportionate scrutiny back at home and around the world, which could badly complicate matters for him.

Biden’s love of and concern for Israel and the Jewish people is genuine and long-standing. But at the same time, he is facing a likely election rematch against the Democrats’ bogeyman, Donald Trump.

He will need every constituency he can get. Most polls show Biden one percentage point ahead of Trump if the general election were held now, with [some](http://chrome-extension/efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/fm.cnbc.com/applications/cnbc.com/resources/editorialfiles/2023/10/18/allamericathistime.pdf) showing Trump leading.

The progressive wing of the Democratic Party has never been an enthusiastic backer of the president. He was the establishment choice in 2020 to keep Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren from capturing the Democratic nomination.

Biden promised explicitly in his campaign platform to reopen the PLO mission in the capital and the US Jerusalem consulate to the Palestinians, to advance policies around a two-state solution, and to oppose settlement expansion.  He has delivered on none of those pledges, and his statements of firm support for Israel, as IDF forces pound the Gaza Strip, are sure to further frustrate progressives, for whom support for the Palestinians is a core priority.

Moreover, with independent far-left professor Cornel West polling around 5 percent, disillusioned progressives have a home for a protest vote, which might be just enough to push Trump over the lineSo he has to keep them on board without exposing himself to attacks from Trump and other Republicans about being unreliable in his backing of Israel, or being complicit in potential IDF military struggles for seeking to limit Israel’s freedom of action.

### Biden’s ambitious Middle East vision

The course the war takes will also the determine the viability of Biden’s vision of a pro-American Middle East bloc.

His administration had been eager to take the next steps in the bipartisan American project of moving out of the Middle East to focus on China, and later Russia. The goal was to put the Iran nuclear issue to rest by striking a new long-term deal, place human rights at the center of relations with Arab allies, and end the 20-year war in Afghanistan.

Though Biden accomplished the last goal, he has learned the lesson that past US presidents have also learned the hard way – America cannot disengage from the Middle East.

As energy prices spiked in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and conflicts in Gaza, Yemen and elsewhere demanded his attention, Biden changed his tune. In July 2022, he flew to Israel and Saudi Arabia to “start a new and more promising chapter of America’s engagement there.”

His administration also began putting its back into multilateral frameworks, like the Negev Forum, the I2U2, and the Aqaba/Sharm el-Sheikh talks. After initially refusing to even say the name, the White House eventually committed to expanding the Abraham Accords.

Then in March, Saudi Arabia and Iran reached a [deal](https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-saudi-arabia-deal-casts-china-in-unfamiliar-but-growing-global-role/) in Beijing. It was a rude awakening for the Americans. If they leave a vacuum in the Middle East, China, Iran and Russia will fill it, they realized.

In September, the US and G20 allies announced an ambitious rail and shipping corridor linking India with the Middle East, Israel and Europe, a counterweight to the Chinese Belt and Road project. Biden said on the trip that it could create “a future of greater peace, greater security and greater prosperity.”

“This can be the beginning of even a greater era of cooperation,” he predicted.

The Biden Administration also leaned heavily into attempts to bring about a Saudi-Israel normalization deal, which would require American defense commitments to Riyadh, keeping the Saudis in America’s embrace for the long term.

Biden’s entire regional vision – which has become an integral part of his strategy against America’s main adversaries, China, Russia, and Iran – now hangs in the balance. The pro-Western Arab countries – with the exception of Qatar – all despise Hamas and have no problem with Israel doing what it wants to the group, but they are more concerned right now with the sentiment of the street. Antisemitism is rampant in these countries, and the Palestinian cause remains dear to the public.

Arab leaders, already criticized domestically for being in bed with the Americans and Zionists, cannot afford to be seen as party to the deaths of thousands of Palestinians as millions more Arabs watch the images on their phones and in their living rooms.

Better to drop out of any emerging multilateral initiatives with Israel, they will reason, than put their own regimes and personal survival on the line.

Meanwhile, Russia and China would be happy to step in if those pro-Western Arab leaderships abandon US projects, and to offer weapons and money with no human rights demands, untainted by support for Israel’s war against Hamas.

### The law of wars

There is an even larger issue at stake in this war: whether liberal democracies can defeat regimes and organizations that reject the values Biden holds dear.

That fight has already been underway since February of last year. Under Biden, the US has [committed](https://www.statista.com/chart/27278/military-aid-to-ukraine-by-country/) more military aid to Ukraine than the rest of the world combined, in an attempt to help the pro-Western government in Kyiv hold off Vladimir Putin’s attempts to force the country back into his orbit.

Now a war rages on another of democracy’s frontiers. To Biden, this is an opportunity to prove that the democratic way is not only more decent and just, but is actually stronger because of the very values it is trying to protect.

“You’re also a democracy,” Biden said in Israel. “Like the United States, you don’t live by the rules of terrorists. You live by the rule of law. When conflicts flare, you live by the law of wars.”

“What sets us apart from the terrorists is we believe in the fundamental dignity of every human life: Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, Jew, Muslim, Christian, everyone. You can’t give up what makes you who you are. If you give that up, then the terrorists win.”

And win Israel must. If this war ends with Hamas still ruling the Gaza Strip, its primary value as an ally to Arab countries – its military reputation – will dissipate. Iran will be encouraged, as will Hezbollah, far more powerful than Hamas, to Israel’s north.

Western allies who are willing to give Israel plenty of slack right now in the hopes that the end goal – the elimination of Hamas – will justify the collateral damage, will be quick to call for an end to hostilities the next time Israel embarks on an operation. If Israel can’t win, they will reason, what justification could there be for civilian deaths?

And, of course, Netanyahu – under whose watch the Jewish people’s worst tragedy since the Holocaust was perpetrated – will see his political life end in ignominy if Israel doesn’t win. Instead of protecting Israel against Iran and forging a historic peace with Saudi Arabia, his legacy will be that of a self-serving leader whose focus on political survival blinded him to the growing threat to the civilians he was elected to protect – and of a wartime leader who botched a war with the world and entire country backing him.

According to retired IDF general Israel Ziv on Channel 12, Biden was telling Netanyahu on Wednesday: We will take care of the aftermath. Washington will help find a new arrangement to administer the Gaza Strip, and will make sure the Saudi deal is back on track. But you had better win.

The stakes couldn’t be higher on the Israeli side, but Biden has an immense amount riding on the outcome – and on the manner in which Israel achieves it.

“It’s a temporary measure, which should be for the short term,” said the source, who refused to be quoted by name.

The National Security Council late on Tuesday called on all Israelis in Turkey to leave “as soon as possible.”

On Wednesday, its consulate in Istanbul said it was for their own safety given the growing terrorist threats against Israelis abroad.

Israel arranged evacuation flights to repatriate citizens from Turkey, while issuing a travel warning of the highest threat level to the country.

The spike in security threats in Turkey came after a deadly explosion at a Gaza hospital parking lot on Tuesday, which has been blamed by Hamas and the Arab and Muslim world on Israel.

[Jerusalem](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-presents-evidence-misfired-gazan-rocket-caused-hospital-blast-slams-hamas-lies/) has produced evidence to refute the claim and show that the blast, which killed scores of people, was caused by a misfired rocket launched by a Palestinian terror group toward Israeli cities. The [US](https://www.timesofisrael.com/intel-shows-israel-not-responsible-for-gaza-hospital-blast-white-house-says/), other Western countries and many analysts have confirmed or endorsed the Israeli account.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has joined many Arab countries in blaming Israel, straining diplomatic relations. Turkey’s foreign ministry also condemned “these barbaric attacks in the strongest terms,” in a statement issued shortly after the explosion.

Turkey maintains ties with Hamas, the terror group that slaughtered some 1,400 Israelis in an unprecedented assault from Gaza on October 7, plunging the region into war.

On Tuesday night, shortly after the hospital blast, protesters demonstrated outside the Istanbul consulate and the embassy in Ankara, shouting pro-Palestinian chants. Dozens were hurt in clashes between police and protesters outside the consulate when several demonstrators tried to overcome security barricades in order to enter the consulate building. Police detained five people.

Ankara was previously involved in trying to mediate a deescalation of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

Turkey’s top diplomat Hakan Fidan said Tuesday that following requests from several governments, his country had been in touch with the Hamas terror group over some 200 Israeli and foreign hostages the terror group is holding in Gaza in the aftermath of its murderous onslaught on October 7, in which thousands of terrorists invaded Israel and massacred some 1,400 people, most of them civilians murdered in their homes or at an outdoor music festival.

On Monday, Fidan spoke with Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh on the phone about the possibility of the release of hostages.

“Our efforts continue, especially for the release of foreigners, civilians and children. We will continue our efforts to ensure lasting peace,” Fidan said on Tuesday.

The vast majority of the captives are civilians.

Convening to approve a series of emergency wartime measures, the Knesset on Wednesday passed a law enabling National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir to worsen the conditions of security prisoners.

According to the new law, which passed 16-1, the national security minister would be able to declare a “prison emergency,” upon the recommendation of the Israel Prison Service commissioner and with the consent of the prime minister and the defense minister.

The emergency law is valid for three months.

on September 10, 2023. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

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The emergency law is valid for three months. In particular, Ben Gvir has said that he wants to house Palestinian detainees and prisoners on mattresses, rather than in beds, in order to accommodate a potential influx of terror-related inmates, in the wake of Hamas’s October 7 onslaught that killed some 1,400 Israelis, and Israel’s ensuing war with the terror organization.

Any order issued by the national security minister under this emergency measure would be valid for five days, and extendable for up to 30 days. The Knesset’s National Security Committee can give its consent for further extensions.

Notes accompanying the new law say it is intended to reduce pressure on the prison service, in light of the ongoing war.“The assessment of security officials is that many more detainees are expected to be absorbed in the near future in view of the state of war, taking into account that the fighting is still ongoing,” they read.

Last week, Ben Gvir said that he had consulted Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara on the emergency move, and that she gave her approval

Ben Gvir, who leads the far-right Otzma Yehudit party, has made headlines in the past for ordering the prison service to reduce terror inmates’ shower times and end the practice of baking fresh pita in prison kitchens, as well as reducing prisoner visits. Critics ridiculed some of the measures as spiteful and unhelpful to Israel’s battle against terror.

The Knesset advanced two further wartime measures on Wednesday: a bill to delay certain payments owed by people serving in the war, abducted by Hamas or missing as a result of its terror attack, or living in an evacuated community near the Gaza or Lebanon border, and a bill to hold initial courtroom hearings through video conference.

Both cleared their first reading on Wednesday and were sent to committee for a rapid recall to the plenum, where they are expected to be quickly finalized.

According to the payments bill, creditors and courts must grant a 30-day grace period before requiring payment. The bill grants a similar 30-day postponement for “the execution of actions stipulated in a contract or judgment.”

For the purposes of defining wartime service, the bill extends protection to police officers, firefighters, and prison guards, alongside soldiers.

The defense minister, with approval of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, can extent the period of this temporary order up to December 31, 2023, or longer with committee approvalon September 10, 2023. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

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Illustrative: View of the Gilboa Prison, near the Jordan Valley, December 5, 2022. (Avshalom Sassoni/Flash90)

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Israeli soldiers patrol along a road near the border between Israel and Lebanon, in Israel, Oct. 16, 2023. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)

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Notes accompanying the bill explain that it is geared toward taking pressure off of Israelis most affected by wartime circumstances.

Prisoners would have their right to an in-person hearing curtailed by proposed temporary measures to hold pretrial hearings by video conference, and in exceptional circumstances, telephone calls.

Backers of the bill write that “there is significant difficulty in transporting prisoners and detainees throughout the country, in a way that will not endanger them and those transporting and accompanying them.”

The also cite manpower shortages in the prison service, and say transporting prisoners for hearings would be logistically challenging.

Only wartime and emergency legislation is expected to be advanced until the end of hostilities, barring legislation pushed by consensus between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister Benny Gantz, in line with the terms of their emergency government.

Israel acknowledged Monday that one of its ministries drafted a wartime proposal to transfer the Gaza Strip’s 2.3 million people to Egypt’s Sinai peninsula, drawing condemnation from the Palestinians and worsening tensions with Cairo.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office played down the report compiled by the Intelligence Ministry as a hypothetical exercise — a “concept paper.” But its conclusions deepened long-standing Egyptian fears that Israel wants to make Gaza into Egypt’s problem, and revived for Palestinians memories of their greatest trauma — the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of people who fled or were forced from their homes during the fighting surrounding Israel’s creation in 1948.

“We are against transfer to any place, in any form, and we consider it a red line that we will not allow to be crossed,” Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, said of the report. “What happened in 1948 will not be allowed to happen again.”

A mass displacement, Rudeineh said, would be “tantamount to declaring a new war.”

### Aimed at preserving security for Israel

The document is dated October 13, six days after the Hamas attack. It was first published by Sicha Mekomit, a local news site.

In its report, the Intelligence Ministry — a junior ministry that conducts research but does not set policy — offered three alternatives “to effect a significant change in the civilian reality in the Gaza Strip in light of the Hamas crimes that led to the Sword of Iron war” — using the IDF label given to the war.

The document proposes moving Gaza’s civilian population to tent cities in northern Sinai, then building permanent cities and an undefined humanitarian corridor. A security zone would be established inside Israel to block the displaced Palestinians from entering. The report did not say what would become of Gaza once its population is cleared out but its authors deem this alternative to be the most desirable for Israel’s security.

Egypt’s Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the report. But Egypt has made clear throughout this latest war that it does not want to take in a wave of Palestinian refugees.

Egypt has long feared that Israel wants to force a permanent expulsion of Palestinians into its territory, as happened during the war surrounding Israel’s independence. Egypt ruled Gaza between 1948 and 1967, when Israel captured the territory, along with the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The vast majority of Gaza’s population are the descendants of Palestinian refugees uprooted from what is now Israel.

Egypt’s president, Abdel Fattah El-Sissi, has said a mass influx of refugees from Gaza would eliminate the Palestinian nationalist cause. It would also risk bringing militants into Sinai, where they might launch attacks on Israel, he said. That would endanger the countries’ 1979 peace treaty. He proposed that Israel instead house Palestinians in its Negev Desert, which neighbors the Gaza Strip until it ends its military operations.

Yoel Guzansky, a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said the paper threatened to damage relations with a key partner.

“This is a grave mistake. It might cause a strategic rift between Israel and Egypt,” said Guzansky, who said he has consulted for the ministry in the past. “I see it either as ignorance or someone who wants to negatively affect Israel-Egypt relations, which are very important at this stage.”

Egypt is a valuable partner that cooperates behind the scenes with Israel, he said. If it is seen as overtly assisting an Israeli plan like this, especially involving the Palestinians, it could be “devastating to its stability.”

### Questions of legitimacy – and other possible destinations

Egypt would not necessarily be the Palestinian refugees’ last stop. The document speaks about Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates supporting the plan either financially, or by taking in uprooted residents of Gaza as refugees and in the long term as citizens. Canada’s “lenient” immigration practices also make it a potential resettlement target, the document adds.

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At first glance, this proposal “is liable to be complicated in terms of international legitimacy,” the document acknowledges. “In our assessment, fighting after the population is evacuated would lead to fewer civilian casualties compared to what could be expected if the population were to remain.”

An Israeli official familiar with the document said it isn’t binding and that there was no substantive discussion of it with security officials. Netanyahu’s office called it a “concept paper, the likes of which are prepared at all levels of the government and its security agencies.”

“The issue of the ‘day after’ has not been discussed in any official forum in Israel, which is focused at this time on destroying the governing and military capabilities of Hamas,” the prime minister’s office said.

The document dismisses the two other options: reinstating the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority as the sovereign in Gaza or supporting a local regime. Among other reasons, it rejects them as unable to deter attacks on Israel.

The reinstatement of the Palestinian Authority, which was ejected from Gaza after a weeklong 2007 war with Hamas, which won power, would be “an unprecedented victory of the Palestinian national movement, a victory that will claim the lives of thousands of Israeli civilians and soldiers, and does not safeguard Israel’s security,” the document says.

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh has [said in a newspaper interview](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pas-premier-says-ramallah-wont-take-over-gaza-without-plan-that-includes-west-bank/) that the PA would only agree to take over Gaza as part of a broader peace initiative to create a Palestinian state.

### Lobbying Egypt to take in refugees

Despite the downplaying of the paper by Netanyahu’s office, the Financial Times [reported](https://www.ft.com/content/75971d8b-e2fd-4275-8747-0bd443673483) Monday that the premier has sought to convince European leaders to pressure Egypt into accepting refugees.

Officials from the Czech Republic and Austria relayed the idea during a meeting of European leaders last week but officials from France, Germany and the UK quickly rejected the proposal as unrealistic, given Egypt’s public opposition to taking in refugees.

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Israel has refused to publicly promise that refugees will be allowed back into Gaza if they leave, hardening Cairo’s stance against the idea, an Arab diplomat told The Times of Israel last week.

Gaza’s Hamas-run health ministry has said that more than 8,300 people have been killed in the war, many of them children. The figures issued by the terror group cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include its own members killed in Gaza and Israel, as well as the victims of what Israel says are hundreds of errant Palestinian rockets aimed at Israel that have landed inside the Strip since the war began.

The current war erupted on October 7 after some 2,500 Hamas and other terrorists stormed across the Gaza frontier in a multi-pronged attack and killed over 1,400 people, most of them civilians slaughtered in their homes and at an outdoor music festival.

The terrorists also abducted over 230 people to Gaza. The captives, also mainly civilians, include women, the elderly and children, some still in diapers.

Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas and remove it from power. The IDF has carried out intensive strikes on Gaza and troops have entered the Palestinian enclave ahead of an expected major ground operation. Israel says it is striving to minimize civilian casualties and has instructed Palestinians in the northern Gaza Strip to evacuate and head south. According to the IDF, some 700,000 people of the estimated 1.1 million population of northern Gaza have evacuated south.

Terror groups led by Hamas have continued to barrage southern and central Israel with rocket fire, causing further deaths and injuries. There has also been sporadic rocket fire in the north from the Lebanese Hezbollah terror group and its allies. Over 200,000 people in Israel have been displaced from their homes.

International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan said Sunday his institution was conducting “active investigations” into the October 7 Hamas massacres, as well as the situation in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Visiting the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, Khan also warned that preventing access to humanitarian aid could constitute a war crime and urged Israel to allow more trucks into the enclave.

Khan said his office had “active investigations” ongoing into “any crimes committed on the territory of Palestine and any crimes committed, whether it’s by Israel and Palestine or whether it’s acts committed on the territory of Palestine or from Palestine into Israel.”

“This includes current events in Gaza and also current events in the West Bank,” Khan said, adding that he was “very concerned also by the spike of the number of reported incidents of attack by settlers against Palestinian civilians” in the West Bank.

He indicated the investigation was a continuation of the ICC’s existing probe focusing on the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict, Israeli settlement policy and the Israeli response to protests at the Gaza border that was launched by Khan’s predecessor Fatou Bensouda and approved in 2021.

Israel, which isn’t a member of the court and hasn’t ratified its Rome Statute, has refused to cooperate with the ICC.

The court’s jurisdiction only covers the West Bank and Gaza, but Khan indicated it could also cover actions by Gazans on October 7, when some 2,500 Palestinian terrorists broke into southern Israel, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and kidnapping over 230.

We are independently looking at the situation in Palestine, we’re looking at the events in Israel and the allegations that Palestinian nationals have also committed crimes, we need cooperation and assistance,” he said.

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He noted that hostage-taking was a breach of the Geneva Conventions.

“I call for the immediate release of all hostages taken from Israel and for their safe return to their families,” Khan said.

Speaking to reporters in Cairo later, the British lawyer said he wanted “to underline clearly to Israel that there must be discernible efforts without further delay to make sure civilians” in the Hamas-run Palestinian territory “receive basic food, medicines.”

“Impeding relief supplies as provided by the Geneva conventions may constitute a crime within the court jurisdiction,” Khan said. “I saw trucks full of goods full of humanitarian assistance stuck where nobody needs them, stuck in Egypt, stuck at Rafah.”

“These supplies must get to the civilians of Gaza without delay,” he added.

An Israeli military official said Sunday that “hundreds of tons” of humanitarian supplies have been provided so far to Gaza through a joint mechanism managed together with the US, Egypt and the UN.

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The aid goes through Israel into Egypt via the Nitzana border crossing between the two countries south of Gaza where it undergoes a security check. It is then taken through the Rafah crossing on the Egypt-Gaza border and transferred to UN agencies for distribution.

“We are trying to act in accordance with the international laws of war in order to minimize any harm to civilians, but war has consequences,” said IDF Col. Elad Goren, who heads the civilian department of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories. “But Hamas started a war against the State of Israel, and its [the Hamas] government harms and exploits those who are trying not to take part in terrorism.”

He added that the amount of humanitarian aid that will be transferred to the territory will “increase dramatically” in the coming weeks

Khan also warned Israel about sticking to the laws of conflict as it carries out airstrikes and a ground offensive aimed at eliminating Hamas, the Strip’s de facto rulers.

“Israel has clear obligations in relation to its war with Hamas, not just moral obligations but legal obligations,” he said.

“These principles equally apply to Hamas in relation to firing indiscriminate rockets into Israel.”

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza says more than 8,000 people have been killed since October 7, mainly civilians and half of them children. The figures cannot be verified, and are thought to include fighters as well as those killed by rockets misfired by terror groups in the Strip. Israel says it does not target civilians and has sought to limit civilian casualties, including by urging those in northern Gaza, where the main fighting is taking place, to move south.

The ICC prosecutor evoked the Holocaust and World War II in explaining the reason for his mission to the region, saying the ICC will work professionally to “separate allegation from fact,” and examine all relevant evidence.

“This is a moment of objectivity, a moment of quiet reflection and it needs to be a moment in which the international community and the international architecture built on the rubble of World War II, the terrible gas chambers and the Holocaust, the razing of cities throughout Europe, [which] was meant to create institutions that would ensure never again would we see abominations where people could be targeted for their race, religion, culture, where they come from or what passport they hold,” said Khan.

“Those promises need to be fulfilled.”

Senior Israeli officials talked up the prospect of an imminent large-scale ground campaign in the Gaza Strip to root out the Hamas terror group Thursday, making a series of visits to Israel Defense Forces soldiers stationed near the territory and predicting that the fighting will be “difficult, long and intense,” but ultimately victorious.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told troops near Gaza that the order to enter the Hamas-run Palestinian enclave would come “soon.”

“You now see Gaza from afar, soon you will see it from the inside,” Gallant told troops of the Givati Brigade. “The order will come.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also paid a visit to the frontlines, rallying a group of Golani soldiers near the Gaza border and telling them Israel was on its way to a major victory.

“We are going to win with all our might,” Netanyahu told the group of soldiers. “All of Israel is behind you, and we are going to heavily strike our enemies so that we can achieve victory.

The head of the IDF Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman, said the expected ground offensive would be “long and intense.”

“This war was forced on us, with a cruel enemy that harmed us greatly. But we stopped them… we are striking them heavily,” Finkelman told troops near the Gaza border

“Now, the maneuver is going to move the fighting to their territory. We are going to beat them in their territory,” he said. “It’s going to be difficult, long and intense.”Israel has for the past week urged all residents of northern Gaza, some one million people, to evacuate to the center and south of the Strip as it prepares to intensify operations in the enclave’s north. Hundreds of thousands have done so, according to the military, despite Hamas urging them not to leave their homes and in some cases putting up roadblocks.

In a further sign the start of the ground offensive may be looming, Netanyahu’s security cabinet, the body which must approve a ground incursion, met Thursday evening. The forum has convened many times throughout the war already.

War erupted after some 2,500 Hamas-led terrorists blasted through the Israeli border fence on October 7, streamed into Israel via land, sea and air under a barrage of thousands of rockets, and killed some 1,400 people, the vast majority of them civilians.

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Terrorists also took at least 203 hostages of all ages into Gaza and are holding them captive.

Israel called up 360,000 reservists in the wake of the massacre and has vowed to eliminate Hamas, which has been the de facto ruler in the Strip since 2006.

With tanks and weapons mustering near the Gaza border, reports have indicated that the military is awaiting a green light from the political leadership.

Recent days have seen growing pressure on the government to devise a clear strategy for how it plans to avoid getting bogged down in a lengthy reoccupation of the Strip, while ensuring the Palestinian enclave is no longer managed by the terror group and no longer poses a threat

Gallant also took responsibility for the failure to prevent Hamas’s onslaught on southern Israel, speaking at a military assembly ground near the Gaza border.

“I am responsible for the defense establishment. I was responsible for it in the last two weeks, even in the difficult incidents, and I am responsible for bringing it to victory in the battle,” Gallant said.

“We will be precise and deadly and we will continue until we complete the mission,”

National Unity party chair Benny Gantz and fellow party member Gadi Eisenkot, who entered the coalition last week to form an emergency wartime cabinet, have demanded the creation of a Gaza exit strategy and have tasked a committee with drawing one up, an Israeli official told The Times of Israel earlier this week.

US President Joe Biden’s administration has also been privately pressing Israel to flesh out its exit strategy, the Israeli official and a US official said at the time. Netanyahu and his inner circle indicated to their American counterparts that Israel had not yet come up with such a strategy and is more focused on the immediate goal of removing Hamas from power in Gaza, the US official said.

On Wednesday, Biden cautioned Israel against getting bogged down in Gaza indefinitely, drawing on the US’s experiences in Afghanistan following its 2001 invasion to topple the Taliban in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

“Justice must be done,” Biden said in Tel Aviv. “But I caution this: While you feel that rage, don’t be consumed by it… After 9/11, we were enraged in the United States. While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes.”

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Betraying an unease with the possibility that Israel’s campaign against Hamas could get derailed by civilian losses, Biden warned that wartime leadership “requires clarity about the objectives and an honest assessment about whether the path you’re on will achieve those objectives.”

According to the Kan public broadcaster, the political leadership reportedly ordered the military to slow or halt activity in Gaza during Biden’s trip, and Jerusalem was thought to prefer to wait until after Biden’s visit to put boots on the ground in Gaza.

The fighting, which indeed appeared to abate during Biden’s visit to Israel on Wednesday, resumed in full force on Wednesday night and Thursday, with extensive Israeli airstrikes on Hamas targets in the Strip, and Palestinian terror groups firing frequent barrages of rockets toward central and southern Israel.

There were also [growing exchanges of fire and rocket attacks on the Lebanon border](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-shells-southern-lebanon-after-missiles-fired-at-border-community/), compounding fears that the powerful Iran-backed Hezbollah terror group could open a new war front, which it and Tehran have threatened will happen if Israel enters Gaza.

In Kiryat Shmona, three people were injured by a rocket strike on a home, in what appeared to be the most serious attack on the city since 2006.

In a briefing last week, a military official indicated that conditions on the northern border could affect the IDF’s decision-making on when to launch an incursion

The prospect of a ground invasion has brought with it concerns that the Strip’s dire humanitarian situation could worsen. Aid is expected to start being delivered to Gazan civilians on Friday, when the Rafah crossing with Egypt was set to open.

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After prodding by Washington, Israel said it would allow water, medicine and food to reach southern Gaza from Egypt, angering some family members of Israelis being held captive in Gaza, who had demanded concessions for their loved ones in exchange for any such move.

Israeli airstrikes on Gaza continued on Thursday, alongside intense rocket fire by terrorists toward Israeli cities and towns, including the Tel Aviv area.

Rockets were fired in the late afternoon and evening toward cities including Holon, Rishon Lezion, Beersheba, Sderot, Ashdod and Ashkelon, as well as Gaza border communities.

Two rockets landed in Sderot, causing damage but no injuries. The vast majority of residents of the Gaza border city have left since the October 7 massacre.

Three senior officials in Gazan terror groups were [reported killed early Thursday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-senior-terror-officials-reported-killed-in-gaza-number-of-israeli-hostages-at-203/). The IDF said an airstrike in the southern Gaza city of Rafah had killed Rafat Abu Hilal, the head of the military wing of Gaza’s Popular Resistance Committees terror group, the third-largest terror faction in the Strip after Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Hamas-affiliated media in Gaza reported that Jamila al-Shanti, the widow of Hamas co-founder Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, was also killed in an Israeli strike.

And Palestinian media outlets reported that the head of the Palestinian National Security Forces in the Gaza Strip was killed in an Israeli airstrike.

The Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza says at least 3,785 people have been killed since Israel began its airstrikes.

Some 1,524 children and 1,000 women are among those killed in the relentless Israeli airstrikes, the ministry said, claiming that another 12,493 people had been injured.

Israel and other international bodies have cast doubt on Hamas’s claims about the toll of those killed and wounded in Gaza. Jerusalem has said some 1,500 terrorists were killed in Israeli territory after the mass infiltration on October 7

The goal of Hamas’s October 7 massacres in southern Israel was to “change the entire equation,” bring permanent war to Israel’s borders and renew attention to the Palestinian cause, a senior member of the terror group’s politburo in Qatar said.

“What could change the equation was a great act, and without a doubt, it was known that the reaction to this great act would be big,” Khalil al-Hayya told The New York Times [in an interview](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/08/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-gaza-war.html) published Wednesday. “We had to tell people that the Palestinian cause would not die.”

On the morning of Saturday, October 7, some 3,000 Hamas terrorists stormed through the border fence into Israel, killing 1,400 people, most of them civilians, and taking at least 240 hostages.

Many of the victims were families murdered in their homes, and 260 people were mowed down at an outdoor music festival.

The onslaught was the deadliest attack in the country’s history, and in response, Israel vowed to eliminate Hamas from Gaza, where the group has ruled since 2007. An offensive has been launched from the air, ground and sea, with over 11,000 targets struck since the start of the war.

“We succeeded in putting the Palestinian issue back on the table, and now no one in the region is experiencing calm,” Al-Hayya said, confirming that he considered the attacks a success.

While world leaders have been pushing for Israel to agree to a ceasefire in its war against the Gaza terror group, Al-Hayya and other Hamas members dismissed the idea that they want to govern Gaza and restore a sense of calm, instead expressing support for endless conflict.

“I hope that the state of war with Israel will become permanent on all the borders, and that the Arab world will stand with us,” Hamas media consultant Taher El-Nounou told The Times.

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“Hamas’s goal is not to run Gaza and to bring it water and electricity and such,” al-Hayya added. “Hamas, the Qassam [Brigades, its armed wing] and the resistance woke the world up from its deep sleep and showed that this issue must remain on the table.”

According to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry, more than 10,000 people inside the coastal enclave have been killed since October 7. However, this number cannot be independently verified and is believed to include members of the terror organization as well as civilians killed by misfired rockets that fell within the Strip.

While international bodies including the United Nations and the World Health Organization have warned that Gaza is facing a humanitarian catastrophe as a result of heavy bombardment and its blockaded borders with Israel and Egypt, Hamas has continued to laud October 7 as a success and has dismissed the high civilian death toll as the price for victory.

On October 24, senior Hamas member [Ghazi Hamad](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/) told Lebanese TV channel LBC that the October 7 massacre was just the first of many, and that “there will be a second, a third, and a fourth” attack if the group is given the chance.

“Will we have to pay a price? Yes, and we are ready to pay it,” he said at the time. “We are called a nation of martyrs, and we are proud to sacrifice martyrs.”

Israel has faced increased calls to allow fuel to enter the Gaza Strip in recent days as hospitals warn that they will soon run out. However, even as the country grants access to other humanitarian aid it continues to refrain from allowing fuel to enter, due to the concern that Hamas will hijack the fuel, using it instead to continue to attack Israel.

For its part, Hamas is believed to be stockpiling about half a million liters of fuel, even as hospitals run low, evidence of which has been corroborated by Western and Arab officials.

“This battle was not because we wanted fuel or laborers,” Al-Hayya told The Times of the consequences faced by Gaza’s civilians after the October 7 attack. “It did not seek to improve the situation in Gaza. This battle is to completely overthrow the situation.”

As Israel marked two weeks since Hamas launched its devastating onslaught on southern Israel, the first 20 trucks carrying aid entered Gaza on Saturday through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt.

The aid moved into the Strip amid continued rocket fire toward southern and central Israel, and as the number of confirmed hostages abducted from Israel and held in Gaza rose to 210.

The Rafah border crossing was closed again after the passage of the trucks from the Egyptian Red Crescent, which is responsible for delivering aid from various UN agencies

Rafah, Egypt, October 21, 2023. (Mohammed Asad/AP)

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It was unclear if any foreign nationals had left Gaza. Ahead of the opening of the border, the US Embassy in Jerusalem had warned of “potentially chaotic and disorderly environment on both sides of the crossing.”

As the trucks went through, an Israeli security official told reporters on Saturday: “As of now, I can tell you that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza. There are hardships in moving people within days to the south of the Gaza Strip, but the population is getting along

“There is no shortage of water in Gaza, there is enough food for the coming weeks, this is in addition to the supply of medicines which, as far as we know, there is no shortage in the hospitals,”Meanwhile, IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari emphasized that “fuel will not enter Gaza.” Israel is concerned that the fuel can be used by terror groups to manufacture weapons.

Cargo planes and trucks have been bringing humanitarian aid to the Egyptian side of Rafah for days, but until Saturday none had been delivered to Gaza

US President Joe Biden had pushed for the trucks to be allowed to pass into Gaza during a solidarity visit to Israel on Wednesday.

Biden had said the first 20 trucks would be a test of a system for distributing aid without allowing Hamas to benefit, with UN agencies set to distribute it on the Gaza side of the border, but warned that if Hamas “doesn’t let it get through or just confiscates it, then it’s going to end.”

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Saturday [welcomed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/blinken-welcomes-start-of-aid-to-gaza-still-working-to-get-foreign-citizens-out/) the delivery of the aid and thanked Egypt, Israel and the United Nations for securing the assistance, which he said will help begin addressing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Blinken said the reopening of Rafah followed days of “exhaustive” diplomatic engagements by the US with Israel and Egypt and called on the sides to do their part to keep Rafah open so that more aid can get into Gaza.

“Hamas must not interfere with the provision of this life-saving assistance,” Blinken said. “Palestinian civilians are not responsible for Hamas’s horrific terrorism, and they should not be made to suffer for its depraved acts.”

The aid was the first such delivery since war erupted after Hamas’s October 7 massacre, which saw some 2,500 terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing hostages of all ages under the cover of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

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The vast majority of those killed as gunmen seized border communities were civilians — men, women, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists, in what Biden has highlighted as “the worst massacre of the Jewish people since the Holocaust.”

Israel says its offensive against Hamas is aimed at destroying the terror group’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire organization, which rules the Strip. Israel says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

Blinken said that the US will continue working to establish safe zones in Gaza where civilians can go to stay out of harm’s way, to allow US citizens looking to leave the Strip to be able to do so, and to secure the release of the hostages taken by terrorists.

Two American-Israeli hostages — mother and daughter Judith and Natalie Raanan — were released on Friday evening.

On Saturday, the Israel Defense Forces said the families of 210 hostages have been notified that their loved ones are being held in the Gaza Strip, but that the number was not final as the military is investigating new information on those still missing.

Also on Saturday, Gaza terrorists fired a number of rocket barrages toward central and southern Israel, with a home hit in the largely evacuated southern city of Sderot.

The Magen David Adom ambulance service said there were no reports of injuries.

Hagari said that over the past 24 hours, a fifth of the projectiles fired by terrorists in Gaza have fallen short in the Strip.

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“More than 550 rockets launched by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad have failed [since the war started], killing innocent civilians in Gaza. They are killing their own civilians,” Hagari said.

Hagari said that the IDF “will continue strikes on Hamas strongholds in northern Gaza,” as the military continued to hit terror targets in the Strip.

The targets included command centers and various other infrastructure belonging to the terror group, as well as a number of anti-tank missile launch sites and sniper positions in high-rise buildings, the military said.

Ahead of the looming ground invasion, the Israeli military has told civilians living in north Gaza to move to the southern part of the enclave.

However, the anonymous security official said Saturday that Hamas is still trying to prevent people from moving south, and several hospitals in the northern part of the Strip have not yet been evacuated.

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Trucks with humanitarian aid for the Gaza Strip enter from Egypt in Rafah on Oct. 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Fatima Shbair)

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Natalie Raanan, 3rd left, Judith Raanan, right, are seen upon arrival in Israel after being released from Hamas captivity as government hostage envoy Gal Hirsch, center, holds their hands, October 20, 2023 (Courtesy)

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A house in Sderot is hit by rocket fire from the Gaza Strip on October 21, 2023 (Sderot Municipality)

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Smoke rises following Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City, Oct. 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Abed Khaled)

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza has claimed that more than 4,100 Palestinians, mainly civilians, have been killed in Israeli bombardments since the October 7 massacres in Israel. The figures issued by the terror group cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include its own terrorists and gunmen, and the victims of a blast at a Gaza City hospital on October 17. Hamas blamed the blast on Israel, which has produced evidence showing it was caused by an Islamic Jihad rocket misfire. The United States, also citing its own data, has endorsed the Israeli account

The Swiss judiciary is investigating possible financing of Hamas from Switzerland despite the country not classifying the group as a terrorist organization, its attorney general says.

The investigation was opened “several weeks” before the October 7 attacks by Hamas on Israel, Stefan Blaettler says, on Swiss public radio station SRF, without revealing further details.

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Qassam Brigades, in Gaza City, on June 14, 2021. (Mahmud Hams/AFP)

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The investigation is expected to be laborious because, unlike the European Union and the United States, Switzerland has not placed bans on Hamas.

But since the attack, mounting calls for the Swiss government to take action has prompted it to respond.

Four days after the attack, the government said it was “of the opinion that Hamas must be classified a terrorist organization

Senior cabinet ministers, as well as members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party, called at a Monday event for the reestablishment of Jewish settlements in Gaza, while others urged the encouragement of Palestinian emigration from the war-ravaged territory.

Speaking at the large ultranationalist conference on the Gaza border, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir said that “encouraging emigration” of Palestinian residents of the territory was the best and “most ethical” solution to the conflict.

Likud members made similar comments, with Social Equality and Advancement of the Status of Women Minister May Golan declaring at the conference that “taking territory” from Arabs is what “hurts them most,” and that settlements in Gaza would bolster Israel’s security

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who also attended the conference, endorsed the idea of rebuilding settlements in Gaza, stating on his way to the event that the Strip was “part of the Land of Israel” and that “without settlements, there is no security.”

Numerous other government ministers and coalition MKs attended the event, including Negev and Galilee Minister Yitzhak Wasserlauf of Ben Gvir’s ultranationalist Otzma Yehudit party, along with Likud MKs Avichay Buaron, Tali Gotliv and Ariel Kallner.

Earlier, veteran settler leader Daniella Weiss, whose settlement movement organized the conference, declared that Gazans had “lost their right” to live in the territory in the wake of the October 7 massacre and would not remain thereA group of several dozen anti-government protesters, including residents of Gaza border communities, demonstrated outside the designated area for the conference, and decried the staging of the event in the area when hostages, including residents of the area, were still being held hostage by Hamas.

Police prevented the protesters from entering the conference area itself.

**The event, dubbed the “Preparing to Settle Gaza” conference, was organized by the Nachala organization, which has for years promoted the establishment of settlements in the West Bank and is now advocating similar policies for Gaza.**

**The conference sported the characteristic vim and ardor of the settler community, with musicians such as Aharon Razel providing the soundtrack to some zestful dancing in between political speeches.**

**The event was attended overwhelmingly by members of the religious-Zionist community, many of whom came from West Bank settlements for the day. Some set up sukkahs, the temporary huts built for the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, on Sunday night and slept at the site ahead of the conference.**

**Workshops were put on by settler activists associated with Nachala to provide instructions on how to build new settlements from scratch, as Nachala has done on several occasions, most notably establishing the illegal outpost of Evyatar in the northern West Bank, which was recently legalized by the government.**

**Along with Nachala, the ultranationalist Religious Zionism and Otzma Yehudit parties also participated in organizing the conference, while the Likud party sent a delegation of some 10 MKs to attend the event.**

**It was the second such conference to be held this year, after a similar event staged by Nachala in Jerusalem in January led to international condemnation.**

“If we want to, we can renew settlement in Gaza,” Ben Gvir said in a brief but central speech from the podium at the conference, held opposite the Netzarim Corridor, which dissects central Gaza.

“We can [also] do something else — encourage emigration. The truth is, this is the most ethical and the most correct solution,” he added, while adding that this should not be done “by force” and that Gazans should be told Israel is “giving them the option” of going to other countries.

“The Land of Israel is ours,” he declared.

Writing on X on his way to the conference, Smotrich said that territory relinquished by Israel in the past had turned into “Iranian forward terror bases,” and endangered the country.

“Today’s conference is part of a public process of advocacy and meant to harness [the public], and is intended to promote a practical process of pioneering, Zionist settlement,” he wrote.

He noted, however, that the national debate on rebuilding settlements in Gaza was relevant “for the day after the war,” which would be decided “in the normal democratic ways.”

Earlier in the day, Nachala leader Weiss went even further, essentially calling for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza by proclaiming that the Palestinian population had “lost their right” to live there.

“Wars bring about the terrible issue of refugees. October 7 changed history, as a result of the brutal massacre Gazan Arabs lost their right to be here; they will not stay here, they will go to different countries, we will convince the world,” declared Weiss, a veteran campaigner for the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

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“We came here to settle the entire Gaza Strip, from north to south, not just part of it,” she added in reference to the purpose of the conference itself.

Weiss said that Nachala had set up six “settlement groups” comprising a total of 700 families “who are ready right now” to establish new settlements in Gaza, should the opportunity arise.

In a rambling speech assailing the media, progressives and other perceived opponents of the political right, Likud minister Golan declared that “taking territory from them is what hurts them most,” and insisted that “settlements in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] brought security” to Israel.

Speaking after her, hardline Likud MK Kallner declared that “settlements are total victory,” adding, “What they see as *Dar Islam* [the House of Islam] will become *Dar Yahud* [the House of Jews],” and insisting like Golan that settlements would improve security.

The theme of settlements providing Israel with greater security was widely voiced at the conference, and repeated by Haim Waltzer, a current resident of the recently legalized West Bank outpost of Evyatar and former resident of the Gush Katif settlements in Gaza, which were evacuated in 2005 under the Gaza Disengagement plan.

“Settling the land is my life’s mission. The real reason is that God commanded us [to settle the land] when he gave us the land 3,000 years ago as is written in the Bible,” said Waltzer.

Another reason why we want to settle Gaza is because I believe that this is the only thing that will bring peace,” he said.

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“We are a nation of peace, we only want peace. But I don’t think we have a partner for peace. The only way there will be quiet in Tel Aviv is if we settle Gaza — that is the only way they will feel defeated. The only thing they care about is land. [Taking it away] and settling there is the only thing that will make them feel that we have won and they have been defeated.”

Asked who should govern the Palestinian population of Gaza if Israel resettled the territory and annexed it as the ultranationalist parties seek, Waltzer endorsed Ben Gvir’s policy of “encouraging emigration.”

Oved Hugi, the head of the Likud’s Yad Eliyahu branch in Tel Aviv and one of the few not overtly religious participants in the conference, echoed Golan and Kallner in asserting that only stripping away Gazan territory from the Palestinians would serve as a sufficient deterrent from continuing the conflict with Israel.

Hugi advocated for lopping off northern Gaza from the coastal territory and allocating its land to the kibbutzim and other Israeli communities of the Gaza border region, for settlement and development, as well as maintaining Israeli control over the Philadelphi Corridor on the Gaza-Egypt border to prevent Hamas from rearming.

“The Arabs must lose territory in the war, so that they remember that they lost. For an act like this [the October 7 massacre], they must get the punishment of losing territory,” he said in the Likud sukkah set up at the event.

Cairo’s [“Summit for Peace”](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-chief-arab-leaders-call-for-end-to-israel-hamas-war-urge-peaceful-solution/) was meant to be a diplomatic breakthrough towards a ceasefire in Gaza, but its failure revealed what one analyst called the “fault lines” between Arab and Western states on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In their opening addresses Saturday, Arab leaders and Western delegates agreed on the need for aid to reach Palestinians in Gaza, besieged and under Israeli bombardment after the Hamas terror group’s devastating onslaught in southern communities on October 7.

But after hours of discussion, they found common ground on little else, with the meeting ending without a concluding statement.

(NAC), east of Cairo, on October 21, 2023. (Khaled DESOUKI/ AFP)

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“The disagreement was over condemning Israel, which Western states refused to do,” an Arab official told AFP, requesting anonymity because they are not authorized to speak to the media.

Instead, they sought a statement that placed “responsibility for the escalation on Hamas,” which Arab states refused, according to a different Arab diplomat.

War erupted after Hamas’s massacre, which saw some 2,500 terrorists break through the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air, and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing some 212 hostages of all ages under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.The vast majority of those killed as gunmen seized border communities were civilians — men, women, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists.

### ‘Dialogue of the deaf’

Though a number of Arab leaders condemned the loss of Israeli civilian life, they refused to place the onus on Hamas for the bloodshed.

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Arab states — some involved in the hostage negotiations with Hamas — would have been “in uncomfortable positions with their people” if they had signed on to the condemnation, the Arab official said.

Another point of contention, diplomats said, was Western diplomats wanting to call for the release of hostages abducted by Hamas.

Arab countries, with Qatar in the lead, have been negotiating their release in talks that could have been jeopardized if they signed alongside countries who have supported “Israel’s right to defend itself,”

With nothing left on the table, the meeting amounted to little more than a “dialogue of the deaf,” according to regional expert Karim Bitar, and ended quietly.

The sole statement released was one from the Egyptian presidency — drafted with the approval of Arab attendees, diplomats said — that said decades of band-aid diplomacy had failed to find “a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue.”

Israel has launched an offensive it says is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

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The campaign in Gaza has killed more than 4,600 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run health ministry, and reduced swaths of the densely populated territory to ruins. The Hamas-stated toll cannot be independently verified and is believed to include its own terrorists and gunmen, as well as victims of misfired Palestinian rockets that landed in the Strip.

In addition, Israel has said its forces killed about 1,500 Palestinian terrorists in its own territory following the October 7 invasion.

### ‘No to normalization’

The summit, Bitar told AFP, “perfectly illustrates the deepening fault lines between the West and the Arab world, and the Global South more broadly,” as decades have not dulled “the persistence of the Palestinian question.”

Though the list of Arab states with ties to Israel has grown in recent years, popular anti-Israel sentiment has remained strong.

[Mass protests](https://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-israel-demonstrations-held-across-muslim-world-amid-gaza-war-against-hamas/) in support of the Palestinians have erupted in the region and beyond, with Egyptians taking to Cairo’s iconic Tahrir Square on Friday for the first time in years after protests in the country were banned.

In Morocco — which along with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the 2020 US-brokered Abraham Accords, establishing diplomatic relations with Israel — tens of thousands of protesters chanted, “No to normalization.”

On what was dubbed the “Friday of Rage,” crowds in Bahrain chanted “Death to Israel!”

Across the Arab world, solidarity with Palestinians is still one of the few causes capable of rallying consensus and mobilizing political action.

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“Many have pushed against this centrality,” according to Bitar.

“For 20 years, we’ve been told to ‘move along, there is nothing to see here, it has become a minor, low-intensity conflict,'” he said.

### ‘Fall apart in our hands’

But the idea of “drowning out the Israeli-Palestinian question in an economic mega-deal between the Gulf and Israel” turned out to be a “pipe dream,” he continued.

Since hostilities began, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani — whose government is supported by Iran-backed factions — has condemned the “genocide” undertaken by “the Zionist occupier” on Palestinians.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi meanwhile sounded the alarm, warning that the region’s most fundamental peace deal — the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel — could “fall apart in our hands.”

King Abdullah II of Jordan — which became the second Arab state to recognize Israel in 1994 and hosts more than two million Palestinian refugees and their descendants — said on Saturday the war had revealed a culture of “global silence” on Palestinian death and suffering.

“The message the Arab world is hearing is loud and clear: Palestinian lives matter less than Israeli ones.”

After the abortive end to the Cairo summit, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna said world leaders “must work to put the Palestinian question at the center of concerns.”

Briefing reporters after the meeting, she said, “See you in six months” for the next “Summit for Peace.”

Biden said he had written on the photo of himself as a young senator and Netanyahu as an embassy hand: “Bibi, I love you. I don’t agree with a damn thing you say.'” He told donors at a Friday night fundraiser that Netanyahu still keeps the photo on his desk and had brought it up during Biden’s lightning visit to Tel Aviv last week.

As expectations grow that Israel will soon launch a ground offensive aimed at rooting out Hamas terrorists who rule the Gaza Strip, Biden finds himself facing anew the difficult balancing act of demonstrating full-throated support for America’s closet ally in the Middle East while trying to also press the Israelis to act with enough restraint to keep the war from spreading into a broader conflagration.

Biden has literally, and figuratively, wrapped Netanyahu in a warm embrace since Hamas’s devastating onslaught on October 7. He has repeatedly promised to have Israel’s back as it aims to take out the terror group that controls the Gaza Strip and which carried out the brutal massacre that killed at least 1,400 Israelis, the vast majority of them civilians.

The terrorists, who broke through the border under cover of a barrage of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities, also abducted at least 212 people of all ages, dragging them back to Gaza as hostages. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many in the process or the result of horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists, in what Biden has highlighted as “the worst massacre of the Jewish people since the Holocaust.”

A spokesperson for the government said more than 200,000 Israelis have been displaced by the conflict. The Defense Ministry is actively taking care of 120,000 of those who have left their homes.But Biden is increasingly paying greater public heed to the plight of Palestinians and the potential consequences of a hardline Israeli response.

White House officials say Biden, during his visit to Tel Aviv last week, asked Netanyahu “tough” questions about his strategy and the way forward. Biden himself told reporters on his way back from Israel that he had a “long talk” with Israeli officials “about what the alternatives are” to a possible extended ground operation. US defense officials were also consulting with Israel on the matter.

Airport on October 18, 2023. (Brendan SMIALOWSKI / AFP)

US President Joe Biden told a crowd of Democratic donors over the weekend about a decades-old photo he took with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, an aside that seemed intended to illustrate his long support of Israel and track record of speaking bluntly with the right-wing Israeli leader.

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Some remains of Kibbutz Be’eri, destroyed by Hamas’s deadly onslaught on October 7, photographed on October 20, 2023. (Carrie Keller-Lynn/The Times of Israel)

But Biden is increasingly paying greater public heed to the plight of Palestinians and the potential consequences of a hardline Israeli response.

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“We’re going to make sure other hostile actors in the region know that Israel is stronger than ever and prevent this conflict from spreading,” Biden said Thursday in a nationally televised address on assisting Israel and Ukraine in their wars. “At the same time… Netanyahu and I discussed again yesterday the critical need for Israel to operate by the laws of war. That means protecting civilians in combat as best as they can.”

The pressure on Biden for a balanced approach comes from Arab leaders in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and beyond who have seen large protests erupt in their capitals over the crisis in Gaza. It also comes from European officials, who have expressed horror at the most brutal massacre on Israeli soil in decades, but also underscored that the Israelis must abide by international and humanitarian law. Biden also faces scrutiny from people in the younger and more liberal wing of his Democratic Party, who are more divided over the Israel-Palestinian issue than the party’s centrist and older leaders.

Less than a week into the war, dozens of lawmakers wrote to Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging them to ensure the protection of Israeli and Palestinian civilians by calling for Israeli military operations to follow the rules of international humanitarian law, the safe return of hostages, and diplomatic efforts to ensure long-lasting peace. That was followed by more than a dozen lawmakers introducing a resolution urging the Biden administration to call for an immediate de-escalation and ceasefire.

Three members of the Democratic caucus — Reps. Delia Ramirez of Illinois, Summer Lee of Pennsylvania, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan — wrote to Blinken last week about the “lack of meaningful information” about the status of US civilians, particularly those in Gaza and the West Bank. The administration has said some 500 to 600 US citizens may be in Gaza.

Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota has suggested that the administration has demonstrated a double standard when it comes to valuing the lives of innocent Israelis and Gaza residents.

Israel’s bombing campaign in Gaza has killed more than 4,600 Palestinians, mainly civilians, according to the Hamas-run health ministry, and reduced swaths of the densely populated territory to ruins. The Hamas-stated toll cannot be independently verified and is believed to include its own terrorists and gunmen, as well as victims of a blast at a Gaza City hospital on October 17 caused by an Islamic Jihad misfired missile aimed at Israel, which Hamas blamed on Israel. Israel has produced evidence showing the blast was caused by a Gazan rocket that fell short. The United States, also citing its own data, has endorsed the Israeli account.

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In addition, Israel has said its forces killed about 1,500 Palestinian terrorists in its own territory following the October 7 invasion.

Israel says its airstrikes are targeting all areas where Hamas operates while aiming to minimize civilian casualties, and its goal following the terror group’s murderous rampage across southern Israel is to destroy its ability to govern Gaza.

“How do you look at one atrocity and say, ‘This is wrong,’ but you watch as bodies pile up as neighborhoods are leveled?” Omar asked at a news conference. “Israel has dropped more bombs in the last 10 days than we dropped in a whole year in Afghanistan. Where is your humanity? Where is your outrage? Where is your care for people?”

Inside the administration, there has been debate over whether Biden is pursuing a policy too closely aligned with Israel’s.

Last week, at least one department official resigned, saying he could no longer support what he called a “one-sided” policy that favors Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.

“I cannot work in support of a set of major policy decisions, including rushing more arms to one side of the conflict, that I believe to be short-sighted, destructive, unjust and contradictory to the very values that we publicly espouse,” Josh Paul, an 11-year veteran of the State Department’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, wrote in a statement posted to his LinkedIn account on Wednesday.

Other State Department officials have expressed similar concerns and some of them spoke at a series of internal discussions for employees that were held on Friday, according to people familiar with the events who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations. Many of those comments were angry and emotional, these people said.

Blinken sent a department-wide memo Thursday urging employees to remember the administration’s broader goals for equal justice and peace for both Israel and the Palestinians.

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Biden administration officials, meanwhile, in their interactions with their Israeli counterparts have witnessed trauma — and rage — that is palpable.

The most significant announcement to come out of Biden’s visit to Israel this past week was getting Egypt and Israel to agree to allow a limited number of trucks carrying food, water, medicine, and other essentials into Gaza via the Rafah border crossing.

While the agreement to allow [some aid](https://www.timesofisrael.com/1st-aid-trucks-enter-gaza-as-number-of-confirmed-hostages-held-in-strip-reaches-210/?utm_source=article_hpsidebar&utm_medium=desktop_site) into Gaza appeared to be minor, considering the enormity of the humanitarian crisis, US officials said it represented a significant concession in the position Israel held before Blinken’s meeting with Netanyahu on Monday and Biden’s talks with the Israeli leader on Wednesday.

During the Blinken-Netanyahu talks, US officials familiar with the discussions said they had become increasingly alarmed by comments from their Israeli counterparts about their intention to deny even supplies of water, electricity, fuel, food, and medicine into Gaza, as well as the inevitability of civilian casualties.

Those comments, according to four US officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe private conversations, reflected intense anguish, anger, and outright hostility toward all Palestinians in Gaza.

The officials said that members of the Israeli security and political establishment were absolutely opposed to the provision of any assistance to Gazans and argued that the eradication of Hamas would require methods used in the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II.

One official said that he and others had heard from Israeli counterparts that “a lot of innocent Germans died in World War II” and had been reminded of the massive deaths of Japanese civilians in the US nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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Similarly, Biden and his top aides heard deep anguish from some of the high-ranking Israeli officials involved in the private talks, according to a US official familiar with the matter.

As he [wrapped up his 7.5-hour visit to Tel Aviv](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-to-israelis-justice-must-be-done-but-dont-let-rage-guide-wartime-decisions/), Biden compared the October 7 assault to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States that killed nearly 3,000 people and he recalled the rage Americans felt and the desire for justice by many in the United States. He also urged the Israelis to remember American missteps after 9/11, an era that left the US military ensconced in a 20-year war in Afghanistan.

“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. And while we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes.”

Some 200,000 Israelis have been internally displaced in the ongoing Israel-Hamas following the terror group’s October 7 massacre in southern Israel, and amid escalating skirmishes on the Lebanon border in the north with terror group Hezbollah and allied Palestinian factions, according to Israeli authorities.

About half of the 200,000 were instructed to evacuate from 105 communities near the Gaza and Lebanon borders in the south and north, while half left areas close to the front of their own volition, a spokesperson for the Prime Minister’s Office said Sunday.

The Defense Ministry, through its National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), said it was giving services to about 120,000 displaced Israelis ordered to evacuate from 25 communities up to four kilometers from the Gaza Strip, and from another [28 communities](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-to-evacuate-civilians-from-28-communities-along-lebanese-border-amid-attacks/) up to two kilometers from the Lebanon border, according to a Defense Ministry announcement.

northern border from Lebanon, October 22, 2023. (David Cohen/Flash90)

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According to ministry officials, the numbers are broken down into two main categories: people who have been fully evacuated from their homes, and people who are eligible “to rest and refresh themselves” at state-subsidized guesthouses temporarily.

NEMA has also been working to evacuate some 23,000 Israelis from the northern city of Kiryat Shmona in recent days amid an uptick in attacks on the northern border. NEMA announced Sunday morning that it would [evacuate another 14 towns](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-evacuate-14-more-communities-on-lebanon-border-amid-hezbollah-attacks/) near the Lebanon border, comprising another 11,000 residents

Separately, some 36,000 residents of Sderot and 18,000 Israelis living in 29 towns between four and seven kilometers from Gaza are eligible to go and “rest and refresh themselves” for a week at state-subsidized guesthousesThe state will be responsible for these Israelis until the military allows them to return to what is now a closed military zone near the Gaza border and a restricted area near Lebanon.

Ministry officials said not all of those living in those areas have taken the opportunity to leave at this stage. Additionally, many Israelis have evacuated their homes near the northern and southern borders, despite not being ordered to, according to the ministry.

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Meanwhile, hotel rooms across the country are limited in number and chaos has been registered in the evacuation plan as it gets underway, according to Hebrew media reports.

According to Ynet, there are currently some 56,000 hotel rooms that meet the criteria for hosting people and families displaced by the war, as many hotels are closed and some are not suitable for hosting during wartime.

The Israel Hotels Association (IHA) said the supply of available rooms was running out and that the organization was “scrambling for free rooms all over the country in accordance with the government’s requirements.”

The IHA said an operation center launched together with the Tourism Ministry, which works closely with the hospitality industry, was working “24/7 and responds to all government requests,” adding that “this is a challenging period,” according to a statement cited by Ynet.

Two of Israel’s largest hotel chains, Isrotel and Fattal, said they have worked since the beginning of the war to accommodate government requests to host displaced Israelis.

Also Sunday, the Welfare Ministry said that at least 21 children in 13 families have been left with no parents after they were murdered by terrorists during the Hamas onslaught.

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One of them is a 4-year-old girl held hostage in Gaza. Another young girl’s mother was murdered and her father is being held captive, the ministry said.

Social workers with the ministry are working to identify all such children and provide them and their guardians with all the resources necessary, the ministry added.

Israel is more than two weeks into a war with Hamas after the Iran-backed terror group’s murderous assault on the country on October 7, in which some 2,500 terrorists streamed into Israel by land, sea, and air, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and injuring thousands more. The terror group and other factions dragged over 200 hostages of all ages into Gaza.

Israel says its campaign in Gaza is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

In the north, Hamas ally Hezbollah, also an Iranian proxy, has fired dozens of anti-tank guided missiles, rockets, and mortars at Israeli military positions and Israeli towns since the October 7 Hamas onslaught, while also sending gunmen — some affiliated with Palestinian terror groups — to infiltrate into northern Israel.

Several drones have also been intercepted over northern Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [warned](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-to-troops-if-hezbollah-enters-the-war-its-making-the-mistake-of-its-life/) Hezbollah on Sunday that it would be “making the mistake of its life” if it decided to enter the war.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken Blinken urged members of the UN Security Council on Tuesday to consider “humanitarian pauses” in the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza in order to protect Palestinian civilians.

The remark was the first time a US official has publicly called for any sort of stoppage to the fighting. The proposal falls short of a ceasefire, which US officials have rejected in recent days as a step that would amount to help for Hamas, arguing that Israel still has a right to forcefully respond in order to ensure that it cannot repeat its October 7 massacres in Israeli communities.

“Palestinian civilians must be protected. That means Hamas must cease using them as human shields. It’s hard to think of an act of greater cynicism,” Blinken said during the ministerial Security Council gathering to discuss the Gaza war.

“It means Israel must take all possible precautions to avoid harm to civilians. It means food, water, medicine and other essential humanitarian assistance must be able to flow into Gaza and to the people who need it. It means civilians must be able to get out of harm’s way. It means humanitarian pauses must be considered for these purposes,” the secretary of state added.

Along with its military campaign, Israel has imposed a near-total blockade of Gaza, though some humanitarian aid has been permitted to enter from Egypt in recent days under a US-brokered deal.

“But [that] is a drop of aid in an ocean of need,” US Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said at the meeting and cautioned that if Gaza runs out of fuel it will be a “disaster.”The UN has warned that hospitals and other vital services in the Palestinian territory risked shutting down without fuel deliveries.

Israel worries that Hamas would use fuel brought into Gaza to manufacture weapons and explosives and says that the terror group has already stolen fuel intended for humanitarian purposes.

Blinken went on to call out much of the international community for failing to explicitly condemn the October 7 Hamas terror onslaught that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, the vast majority of them civilians.

Blinken said that in his conversations with world leaders since the assault, there has been agreement that countries have a right and obligation to respond to terror attacks against their civilians, but indicated that not all of them have publicly acknowledged such support for Israel.

“It must be asked: Where’s the outrage? Where’s the revulsion? Where’s the rejection? Where’s the explicit condemnation of these horrors?” Blinken asked, referring to Hamas atrocities committed during its assault.

On October 7, Hamas abruptly bombarded Israel with thousands of rockets while over 2,500 gunmen breached the border with the Gaza Strip. The terrorists rampaged murderously through southern areas slaughtering those they found, butchering entire families in some communities and also killing 260 at an outdoor music festival. Some victims were mutilated, raped, and tortured. Dozens of children were killed. Before the IDF could counter the invasion, over 220 people of all ages were abducted and dragged back to Gaza as captives. Four have since been released.

The secretary called on countries to do everything in their power to secure the release of the remaining hostages in Gaza.

Israel has responded to the Hamas assault by vowing to destroy the terror group and launching intensive strikes in Gaza, saying it is hitting terror targets while trying to avoid civilian casualties. It has told over one million Gaza residents to evacuate the northern part of the Strip ahead of an expected ground incursion. Hamas has continued to rain rockets on southern and central Israel while also attempting further terror infiltrations.

The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry says the Israeli strikes have killed over 5,700 Palestinians so far. Those numbers cannot be independently verified and are believed to include Hamas’s own members, as well as civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rocketsAnother concern is that Iran’s proxies in Lebanon and Syria will try to open northern fronts in the war against Israel. There have been repeated deadly skirmishes between the IDF and the Hezbollah terror group along the Lebanese border as well as rocket attacks on northern bases and civilian communities. Rockets have also been fired from Syria.

US troops have been attacked in Iraq and in Syria with drones and rockets in separate incidents over the past week. A group of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq warned that US forces “must leave immediately” or their bases in Iraq and elsewhere in the region will continue to come under attack.

Blinken told the Security Council that while the US does not seek conflict with Iran, it will respond if Tehran or its proxies attack US personnel. “Make no mistake. We will defend our people. We will defend our security swiftly and decisively.”

Blinken urged Security Council members to call out Iran for its malign regional activity and to warn it, as Washington has, not to open another front against Israel.

“Act as if the security and stability of the entire region and beyond is on the line, because it is,” Blinken told members.

He closed by urging members to “redouble our collective effort” to work toward a two-state solution following the outbreak of the war in Gaza.

“The only road to lasting peace and security in the region, the only way to break out of this horrific cycle of violence is through two states for two peoples,” Blinken said, acknowledging that it will be difficult“Nothing would be a greater victory for Hamas, than allowing its brutality to send us down the path of terrorism and nihilism. We must not let it. Hamas does not get to choose for us,” Blinken said, adding that the path the US and the world should choose is one where the region is more integrated and “normalized” — hinting at efforts to broker an Israel-Saudi agreement.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with soldiers on the northern border and issues words of warning to the Hezbollah terror group amid repeated clashes on the border with Lebanon.

“If Hezbollah decides to enter the war, it will long for the Second Lebanon War,” Netanyahu says, according to his office, referencing Israel’s 2006 war with Lebanon. “It will be making the mistake of its life. We will strike it with strength that it cannot even imagine and the significance to it and to the country of Lebanon will be devastating.”

Netanyahu tells the soldiers that “I know that you lost friends, and it’s a very difficult thing, but we are in the fight of our life, a fight for our home. That’s not an exaggeration, it’s not an overstatement, that’s this war. It is kill or be killed, and they need to be killed.”

As sirens sounded in central Israel on Saturday evening, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that the second stage of the campaign to destroy Hamas had begun with an expanding ground offensive into the Gaza Strip.

Projecting an image of unity alongside Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and fellow war cabinet minister Benny Gantz at a Tel Aviv press conference, Netanyahu announced: “This is the second stage of the war whose goals are clear — to destroy Hamas’ governing and military capabilities and to bring the hostages home.”

He added that the decision to begin ground operations had been made unanimously, both by the war cabinet and the security cabinet.

“Broadening the ground offensive does not clash in any way with our ability to return the hostages,” he argued.

He was also asked about a potential [“all for all” deal](https://www.timesofisrael.com/meeting-netanyahu-families-of-gaza-hostages-urge-all-for-all-prisoner-swap/) that would see all Hamas-held hostages freed and all Palestinian security prisoners in Israeli jails released, a notion Hamas leaders have increasingly called for.

“We are discussing the issue,” he said, without going into details, and added that he cannot share intelligence and considerations that the cabinet is debating. Discussing the terms of a potential deal publicly “will not help to realize” oneGround forces, including infantry, combat engineering forces and tanks, entered Gaza on Friday night and remained there on Saturday, operating deeper inside the Hamas-run territory than previous limited incursions.

“Our commanders and soldiers fighting in enemy territory know that the nation and the national leadership stand behind them,”

Netanyahu said troops that he has met in the field are determined to make Hamas pay for its actions on October 7.

“They are determined to eradicate this evil from the world, for our existence and, I add — for all of humanity.”

Netanyahu continued: “We always said, ‘Never Again’. Never Again’ is now.”

The prime called the abduction of the hostages — including civilians of all ages — “a crime against humanity.”

And he denounced those who “dare to accuse our soldiers of war crimes” as hypocrites and liars.

“The IDF is the most moral army in the world; the IDF does everything to avoid harm to non-combatants,” he said, again calling on residents of northern Gaza to head to the southern Gaza Strip, as Israel has repeatedly done in recent weeks.

Netanyahu accused Hamas of war crimes, saying it “uses citizens as human shields,” uses hospitals as terror headquarters and takes fuel meant for hospitals to supply its war.

On Saturday, the army said it would start allowing significantly more humanitarian aid to enter the southern Gaza Strip from Egypt.

The IDF hopes that the additional food, water and medical supplies will encourage more Palestinians to leave the northern part of the Gaza Strip for the south.

Israel has repeatedly warned that it is heavily targeting Gaza City and other areas in northern Gaza, where Hamas is believed to have its main bases of operations and extensive underground installations, many of them located under the city. The IDF says it will not allow fuel into the Gaza Strip, as it says it is used by Hamas to manage the fighting against Israel.

Netanyahu said the initial stage of the war — launched after Hamas terrorists burst through the border fence and slaughtered 1,400 Israelis, over a thousand of them civilians, on October 7 — had been a massive air campaign “to allow our ground forces to go in as safely as possible.”

“We eliminated countless murderers, including mass murderers. We destroyed countless headquarters and terrorist infrastructure. We are only at the beginning,”

Netanyahu added that the war will be “long and hard, and we are ready. It is our second War of Independence. We will fight to defend the homeland. We will fight and we will not withdraw.”

“Israel is fighting not only its war, but humanity’s war against the barbarians,” he said.

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“Our allies in the Western world, and our partners in the Arab world, know that if we do not win, they are next in line in the campaign of conquest and murder from the axis of evil,” he says.

He characterized the war as one of “light over darkness, life over death. This is the mission of our lives and my life.”

Taking his first questions from reporters since the Hamas massacres, Netanyahu refused to directly answer whether he bears responsibility for the Palestinian terror group’s deadly onslaught.

“After the war everyone will have to give answers, myself included,” he said, repeating comments he made earlier in the week.

But, he stressed, “There was an awful debacle.”

He also refused to commit to setting up a state commission of inquiry — the most powerful and consequential investigative panel — to investigate the failings that enabled the Hamas atrocities. “There will not be a stone left unturned,” he said, adding that his focus right now was only on winning and “saving the state.”

Netanyahu was also asked whether his government’s judicial overhaul efforts had distracted attention from security challenges, and said the legislative proposals to weaken the courts are “no longer on the agenda,” and that disagreements had been resolved in the face of war.

Responding to a question about Iran’s involvement in the October 7 attacks, Netanyahu said: “Iran supports Hamas… provides over 90% of Hamas’s budget. It finances, it organizes, it directs, it guides.

“I cannot tell you for certain that in this specific operation, at this particular moment, they were involved in the micro-planning.”

But, he added, there was no Hamas without Iran, and no Hezbollah either. “That’s the axis of evil, against the free world and the moderates in the Arab world.”

### Shaking the ground in Gaza

Speaking after Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that not a moment goes by when he is not thinking about the hostages, and that Israel is doing everything it can to bring them back. “It is not a secondary mission,” he said.

Gallant argued that the harder Israel hits Hamas, the greater the chances Hamas will agree to release hostages, something Netanyahu and Gantz also asserted.

“Over the last day, we advanced to a new stage” in the war, Gallant said. “The strength of the fire shook the ground in Gaza, and it’s different than anything Hamas has experienced since its creation.

“IDF forces are maneuvering in the relevant places, and are striking Hamas arrays right now, above ground and underground.”

“Hamas is suffering shocks it has never suffered,” he said.

Gallant said Israeli forces in Gaza are receiving all the intelligence and supportive fire they need, adding that the operation is precise, lethal and extremely powerful.

He added he “has full faith” in the IDF chief of staff, the heads of Shin Bet and Mossad, and the soldiers in the field.

“It will not be a short war. It will be a long war,” he said.

“It is us or them.”

### No time limit

Gantz, a former IDF chief of staff and defense minister, took the microphone last, saying that “there is no diplomatic time limit, only an operational clock.”

Past IDF operations have come to a close as world pressure on Israel, including from allies, increased.

“We will do what is right for us,” he pledged, calling on the world to keep up the pressure on Hamas.

“This is total evil against total justice. And justice will win,” he said.

Gantz echoed Netanyahu’s prior comment that is Israel is fighting a second war of independence, saying the country will fight “where it must, and when it must.”

“We will end up not only stronger, but also more united.”

Gantz said that the war would be a multi-stage effort with significant sacrifices, and that it would take a long time to win on the battlefield and to rehabilitate the south.

Responding to a final question from the press, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said the internal relations within the war cabinet are fine. “The prime minister, Minister Gantz, the ministers in the security cabinet, the war cabinet, are conducting discussions that are to the point, good and professional interpersonal relations, and in the end, we are united behind one goal, to bring the victory.”

Gazan terrorists have launched thousands of rockets at Israel since October 7, killing and wounding dozens, and sending hundreds of thousands running for shelter, and the education of hundreds of thousands of children has been disrupted as schools remain shut or operate in a limited format.“destruction of Hamas’s military and governing capabilities; and returning the hostages home.”

Netanyahu says the decision to begin the ground incursion was made unanimously, both by the war cabinet and the security cabinet.

“Our commanders and soldiers fighting in enemy territory know that the nation and the national leadership stand behind them,” he adds.

Netanyahu says the troops that he has met in the field are determined to make Hamas pay for its actions on October 7.

“They are determined to eradicate this evil from the world, for our existence and, I add, for all of humanity,” he says.

The premier quotes the biblical injunction to remember what the Amalekites did to the Israelites. “We remember, and we are fighting.”

Netanyahu says the soldiers are part of a legacy of Jewish warriors that goes back 3,000 years. He stresses that they have one goal: “To defeat the murderous enemy, and to ensure our existence in our land.”

The new sanctions highlight Iran’s role in providing financial, logistical and operational support to Hamas, the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control said in a statement.

They include a Hamas representative in Iran and members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard.

The sanctions were announced as Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo travelled to London to shore up support from Britain, one of America’s closest allies, for the drive to squeeze off funding for Hamas, which both countries consider a terrorist organization.

“Today’s action underscores the United States’ commitment to dismantling Hamas’s funding networks by deploying our counterterrorism sanctions authorities and working with our global partners to deny Hamas the ability to exploit the international financial system,”

Among those targeted are Khaled Qaddoumi, described as a liaison between Hamas and the Iranian government, and Ali Morshed Shirazi and Mostafa Mohammad Khani, officials in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force who are accused of training and assisting Hamas terrorists.The US also sanctioned a number of organizations, including the Iranian Bonyad Shahid, also known as the Martyrs Foundation. US officials said the group, which is affiliated with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, funnels millions of dollars through the Gaza-based Al-Ansar Charity Association for the families of terrorists.

The practice “ultimately serves as a recruiting tool for terrorist activities,” the US said.

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The sanctions freeze any US-based assets owned or controlled by the named individuals and organizations. They also block financial transactions with those designated and prohibit the contribution of funds, goods and services to them.

Most of the international funding for the Gazan terror groups comes from Iran, which has sponsored Hamas with some $100 million annually and the PIJ to the tune of tens of millions, according to Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

Hamas has also received over $1.5 billion in disbursements from Qatar over the past decade. The funds are officially aimed at covering salaries for public workers, fuel purchases and transfers to poor families, but the terror group deducts part of the payments and keeps it for its own operations.

Israel has repeatedly accused Iran of being a key force behind the coordinated Hamas attack on Israel, in which terrorists streamed across the border to carry out a devastating assault on nearby communities, killing some 1,400 people, and taking over 220 people hostage. The vast majority of those killed as gunmen seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists.

Israel says its war against Hamas is aimed at destroying the Iran-backed terror group’s infrastructure and has vowed to dismantle the organization after the massacres while minimizing harm to Gaza’s civilians. The IDF has been calling on Palestinians to evacuate from northern Gaza southward, as it intensifies strikes in the Gaza City area.

The cost of the war between Israel and the Hamas terror group is estimated to be at least NIS 27 billion ($6.8 billion) as of now, according to initial projections by Bank Hapoalim.

That takes into account the significant and massive call of 300,000 [reserve soldiers](https://www.timesofisrael.com/heavy-rocket-fire-on-central-southern-israel-300000-reservists-mobilized-in-48-hours/) who must leave their jobs — the largest mobilization since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Israel called up 400,000 reservists — restoration of infrastructure, housing and parts of the army, the expectation of a long campaign, and multiyear costs of rehabilitating disabled soldiers and caring for the families of fallen soldiers.

“As of the present time, it is very difficult to know how the war will develop – whether it will trigger a ground campaign to conquer parts of Gaza that will take many weeks, or whether a campaign will also be launched in the north and how long the reservists be called up for duty,” said Bank Hapoalim chief strategist Modi Shafrir. “At present time it can be assumed (in a very rough estimate) that the costs of the current war will amount to at least 1.5% of GDP, which means an increase in the budget deficit of at least 1.5% of GDP in the coming year.”

October 9, 2023. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

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Israel’s past wars, such as the 2006 Second Lebanon War, paralyzed part of the country due to rocket barrages, but did not last as long to completely shut down the entire economy. After missiles stopped and troops, reservists came back home, the country’s economy in the post-war period managed to bounce back and recover relatively quickly

“Past experience shows that the impact of the war on GDP is expected to be felt mainly in private consumption and tourism figures but the very large mobilization of the reserve forces and the assessment that the current war will last many weeks, are expected to incur more direct damage to Israel’s economy compared to previous combat operation rounds,”Since the surprise assault by the Hamas on Saturday, in which the terrorists swept through communities in southern Israel massacring hundreds of civilians, and Israel subsequently declared a state of war, local stocks and bonds fell, and many businesses and schools in the country remain closed, while airlines have stopped most flights to Tel Aviv. Israel’s central bank said this week that it will [sell](https://www.timesofisrael.com/bank-of-israel-to-sell-30-billion-to-stop-shekel-collapse-during-gaza-war/) up to $30 billion in foreign exchange to prop up the shekel and prevent its collapse. Despite the central bank’s announcement, the local currency has weakened more than 2% over the past two days and is trading around NIS 3.95 per US dollar.

On Tuesday, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that the world economy faces new uncertainty from the war between Israel and Hamas militants and could see fallout from the Middle East conflict — particularly to oil prices.

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The IMF said it expects global economic growth to slow to 2.9% in 2024 from an expected 3% this year. The forecast for next year is down a notch from the 3% it predicted back in July. That’s as the world has yet to fully recover from a short-lived COVID-19 recession and is reeling from the impact of higher interest rates and the invasion of Ukraine.

It’s “too early” to assess the impact on global economic growth from the days-old war between Israel and Hamas, IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said at a news conference. He said the IMF was “monitoring the situation closely” and noted that oil prices have risen by about 4% in the past several days.

“We’ve seen that in previous crises and previous conflicts. And of course, this reflects the potential risk that there could be disruption either in production or transport of oil in the region,” he said.

As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu already cautioned to expect a prolonged and difficult war until the government’s objectives are reached, the country’s economy, although still fairly robust, is on a downward growth trend.

Since the start of the year, the advancement of the contentious judicial overhaul has led to a slowdown in investments into the high-tech sector, the country’s main growth engine, and a weakening of the shekel exchange rate. High interest rates hikes, rising inflation and expectations of a slowdown in the global economy are also weighing on local growth.

Before the outbreak of the war, the Bank of Israel saw the economy growing at a rate of 3% in each of the years 2023 and 2024, after it expanded by more than 6% last year.

In August, Israel’s fiscal deficit [widened](https://www.timesofisrael.com/fiscal-state-deficit-widens-to-1-3-exceeding-government-target/) to 1.3% of GDP, or NIS 23.1 billion ($6 billion), over the prior 12 months, as state revenue from taxes continued to slide and government expenditure increased. The deficit has swelled above the government’s fiscal deficit target for this year of around 1.1% as the government [approved](https://www.timesofisrael.com/cabinet-approves-nis-13-7b-in-state-funds-to-meet-haredi-coalition-demands/) the allocation of billions of shekels in state funds to meet Haredi coalition demands.

More government spending will now be needed for the military campaign, which could mean that additional funds will have to be borrowed in a high interest rate environment and taxes could be raised, weighing on the economy.

Hamas sent a large group of women and children to act as human shields against Israel Defense Forces troops who were attacking a key compound of the terror group in the Gaza Strip, according to soldiers.

Two IDF soldiers were killed in the Tuesday assault on Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion compound, located in the Jabaliya refugee camp inside Gaza. Israel is battling to destroy Hamas and end its rule over the Strip after the group’s devastating terror attack earlier this month that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, mostly civilians.

According to a report Thursday by the Ynet news site, Hamas sent a group of 100 women and children to act as human shields to protect the compound.

“We are prepared for more incidents of such cynical and blatant use of the population,” said an unnamed IDF officer who apparently witnessed the incident.

The report did not say how troops dealt with the situation, but the compound was captured by the IDF

The army said the large amount of intelligence material seized from the base is already aiding in other Gaza battles, according to the report.

An initial investigation found that IDF Sgt. Roei Wolf and Staff Sgt. Lavi Lipshitz, both 20, [were killed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-idf-soldiers-killed-in-gaza-as-troops-take-hamas-post-kill-commander-50-terrorists/) as forces were withdrawing from the compound. Palestinians fired an anti-tank missile that hit a wall of the building, killing the soldiers and injuring others. The remaining soldiers returned fire while an evacuation operation was carried out.

Around 50 Hamas fighters were killed during ground operations on Tuesday, according to the IDF.

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Israel has repeatedly said Hamas is using civilians as human shields, including by locating operations bases [under hospitals](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamass-main-operations-base-is-under-shifa-hospital-in-gaza-city-says-idf/). Captured Hamas terrorists have [confirmed the claims](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-interrogation-video-hamas-terrorists-confirm-groups-hideout-under-gaza-hospital/), explaining that Hamas knows Israel will not bomb a medical center.

US President Joe Biden [has also said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-says-hamas-using-innocent-gazans-as-human-shields-calls-netanyahu-pas-abbas/) that Hamas is using civilians as human shields.

The war was sparked on October 7, when some 3,000 terrorists led by Hamas burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing over 1,400 people under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

The vast majority of those killed as terrorists seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists. In addition, more than 240 people of all ages were abducted and taken back to Gaza as captives.

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s military infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

The military has also said it is taking care not to bomb areas where hostages are believed to be held, Ynet reported.

In the weeks since the massacre, Hamas and other terror groups have continued to rain rockets on Israel, including from Lebanon in the north, causing further deaths and injuries. Over 200,000 Israelis have been displaced due to the rocket fire and over a million have frequently been forced into bomb shelters for safety.

According to the Hamas-run health ministry, more than 8,700 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which cannot be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh has called on US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to use his current Middle East tour to end Israel’s “aggression” as war rages in Gaza.

The top US diplomat arrived in Turkey on Friday at the start of a trip that includes planned visits to Israel and the West Bank as well as several Arab and Gulf states.

US officials have said that Blinken, in his fourth regional tour since fighting erupted with Hamas’s October 7 assault on Israel, would focus on getting more aid into the Strip

In a video message posted late Friday on Hamas’s social media channels, Haniyeh, who lives in exile, said he hoped Blinken had “learned the lessons of the last three months.”

The war was sparked by the October 7 onslaught, when some 3,000 Hamas-led terrorists burst into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, most of them civilians slaughtered in their home communities and at a music festival amid brutal atrocities, and seizing an estimated 240 hostages.

conflict with Israel, November 1, 2023. (Screenshot, Hamas Telegram channel)

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In response, Israel vowed to destroy Hamas and launched a wide-scale military campaign in Gaza aimed at destroying the group’s military and governance capabilities and returning the hostages.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza says at least 22,700 people have been killed in the Strip since the war erupted on October 7. The Hamas figure does not differentiate between civilians and combatants and includes Palestinians killed by errant rocket fire from Gaza. Israel says it has killed 8,500 terrorists since launching the war.

US support for Israel’s military campaign “has caused unprecedented massacres and war crimes against our people in Gaza,” Haniyeh said.

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“We… hope that he will be more focused this time on ending the aggression” as well as “the occupation of all Palestinian lands,” the Qatar-based Hamas chief added.

Haniyeh also urged regional leaders due to meet Blinken to tell him that stability in the Middle East was “closely linked to our Palestinian cause.”

The United States is Israel’s chief military and political backer and has repeatedly refused to support calls for a ceasefire.

However, Washington has lent its support to humanitarian pauses and backed a UN Security Council resolution demanding more aid be let into Gaza.

The Israel Defense Forces said Saturday it carried out a limited raid in the southern Gaza Strip overnight, as troops continued to push forward with their offensive against the Hamas terror group in the northern part of the enclave.

While the military has focused its activities in northern Gaza, it has also carried out limited raids in the southern Strip to prepare the area for future stages of the war.

The IDF said the operation, carried out by combat engineering forces and tanks, led by the Gaza Division, was to map out buildings and to clear the area of planted explosive devices.

IDF troops operating in the Gaza Strip in a picture released November 4, 2023. (Israel Defense Forces)

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It said that during the operation, troops encountered a Hamas cell that came out of a tunnel. Troops shelled the operatives, killing them, the IDF said.

Meanwhile, Palestinians in Gaza reported Israeli airstrikes overnight and into Saturday across the enclave, including the southern part of the Strip.

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AP reported that Israeli military strikes killed multiple civilians at a UN shelter and hospital in the main combat zone in northern Gaza. The UN agency for Palestinian refugees said two strikes hit a UN school-turned-shelter just north of Gaza City, killing several people in tents in the schoolyard and women who were baking bread inside the building.

It was not clear how the news agency determined the strike was Israeli (Palestinian rocket misfires have also caused multiple civilian casualties in Gaza).

The IDF did not immediately comment, but generally says it targets Hamas terror infrastructure — a vast network of posts, command centers, weapons caches and tunnels — which is embedded within the civilian population. The army has urged residents of northern Gaza to move south as it intensifies its activity in the Gaza City area.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled to the south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned because Israel is also carrying out some airstrikes in the south.

Palestinian media reported that Israel also bombed a house belonging to Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh in the Al-Shathi neighborhood of the city.

The reports said that a missile was fired at the home. There were no immediate reports of casualties in the strike, and no comment from the IDF.

While Haniyeh lives in exile in Qatar, the home was being used by two of his sons, senior Hamas official Ghazi Hamad told The Associated Press.

Earlier in the war, Palestinian media reported that 14 of Haniyeh’s relatives were killed in an Israeli airstrike on another family home in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood.

At the same time as the aerial bombardment, the IDF pushed forward with its ground offensive in the northern part of the enclave, with infantry and tanks encountering numerous attempts by Hamas operatives to come out of tunnels to attack troops.

The forces killed several gunmen and located the tunnels, which will be later destroyed, the IDF said

In one encounter, the IDF said ground forces fought off a group of 15 Hamas operatives, killing several of them, and shelling their observation posts.

The IDF did not immediately provide new information on potential casualties.

Since the start of the ground offensive last week, 24 soldiers have been killed. A total of 341 troops have been killed since October 7.

Conquering Gaza City, the enclave’s largest city and a stronghold of the Strip’s Hamas rulers, will be a daunting task for Israel’s military, whose mission to oust the terror group will force soldiers to fight through the crowded urban labyrinth thought awash with bombs and booby traps and undercut by a vast network of tunnels the terror group’s operatives will use to ambush troops.

On Friday evening the IDF confirmed it carried out an airstrike on an ambulance in northern Gaza which it said was identified as being used by a Hamas cell, close to a battle zone.

Hospital directors of three hospitals asserted strikes hit just as staff were trying to evacuate wounded to the south. Footage showed the aftermath outside Gaza’s largest hospital, Shifa, where more than a dozen bloodied bodies of men, women and young children were strewn next to damaged cars and ambulances.

“A number of Hamas terrorist operatives were killed in the strike,” the IDF said, adding that it would release further information soon. It said that “more detailed information” on the strike had already been shared with allies.

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“We have information which demonstrates that Hamas’s method of operation is to transfer terror operatives and weapons in ambulances,” the IDF said. “We emphasize that this area is a battle zone. Civilians in the area are repeatedly called upon to evacuate southwards for their own safety.”

The military has said Hamas’s main base of operations is located within and under Shifa Hospital, and that it similarly uses other hospitals for cover.

A senior Biden administration official [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-tried-to-send-fighters-to-egypt-in-ambulances-for-wounded-gazans-us-official/) Friday that Hamas tried to sneak its fighters out of the Gaza Strip in ambulances that evacuated dozens of wounded Palestinians to Egypt earlier this week.

Hamas had compiled a list of the seriously wounded that it wanted to evacuate from Gaza for treatment in Egypt, along with thousands of foreign nationals looking to flee the enclave.

The list was then vetted by Egypt and the United States, which found that a third of the names on it were of Hamas fighters, the administration official said, adding that the list was rejected and none of the 76 wounded Palestinians who were ultimately evacuated in ambulances out of Gaza were members of the terror group.

Meanwhile, two senior Israeli officials told The Times of Israel that Israeli inspectors examining trucks of aid to Gaza earlier this week uncovered several oxygen concentrators meant to aerate the tunnels operated by terror organizations in Gaza.

“These weren’t for use in the hospitals, but below them. That’s why they were smuggled among boxes of cookies,” one of the senior Israeli officials said, adding that the entire truck in which the oxygen concentrators were found was barred from entering Gaza.

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The army on Friday also revealed that it had obtained a vast amount of intelligence information from a Hamas stronghold in Jabaliya captured by troops of the Givati Infantry Brigade on Tuesday.

The large military compound served Hamas’s elite Nukhba forces and the terror group’s Jabaliya area intelligence unit, according to the IDF. The military said around 50 Hamas terrorists were killed during the assault on the stronghold. Two Israeli soldiers were also killed amid the fighting.

The IDF said that it recovered Hamas battle plans, maps, command and control charts, communication devices, and the personal details of commanders and operatives of the terror group.

The materials were being researched by the 162nd Division’s intelligence unit and other officials, and will “be used by the IDF in the future fighting,” the military said.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said Friday that more than 9,200 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked war with its murderous assault. Hamas figures cannot be independently confirmed, and the terror group has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll. The figures do not differentiate between terrorists and civilians nor between those killed in Israeli strikes and those killed by the hundreds of terror group rockets that have fallen short inside the Strip.

Israel declared war, with the aim of eradicating Hamas, following the terror group’s devastating October 7 onslaught, in which some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, were brutally murdered in their homes and at a music festival, and over 240 more were abducted, including some 30 babies and children.

Twenty-nine days after Hamas terrorists carried out the rampage, plunging the region into war, Palestinian terror groups continued to fire rockets at communities in southern Israel on Saturday

A rocket launched Friday evening landed in the courtyard of a daycare center in Sderot, causing slight damage to the building, which was closed at the time. Sderot largely emptied out after the October 7 onslaught.

And four rockets were intercepted over Tel Aviv and central Israel by the Iron Dome missile defense system, authorities said. There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage.

There was also rocket fire from Lebanon on Saturday, amid repeated rocket and missile attacks by Hezbollah and allied Palestinian terror factions from southern Lebanon on northern Israel.

“political negotiations.”

“We are ready for political negotiations for a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine,” Haniyeh said during his address, adding a caveat that the process can only begin on condition of a ceasefire and the opening of humanitarian corridors to bring more aid into Gaza.

Ismail Haniyeh’s ostensible willingness to engage in dialogue with Israel seemed wholly at odds with the statement of another member of the Hamas politburo, Ghazi Hamad, who [declared](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/) last week that the terror group intends to perpetrate further massacres akin to the October 7 if only given the chance, until Israel is destroyed

Haniyeh’s call for a ceasefire is a nonstarter for Israel and its [allies,](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/white-house-says-ceasefire-in-gaza-is-not-the-right-answer-right-now/) who have vowed to destroy the terror group.

On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu categorically [dismissed the idea](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-shoots-down-calls-for-ceasefire-says-that-would-be-surrender-to-hamas/), saying that those calling for ceasefire are in effect calling for Israel to surrender to terrorism and barbarism.

“Just as the United States would not agree to a ceasefire after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or after the terrorist attack of 9/11, Israel will not agree to a cessation of hostilities with Hamas,” he said during a press conference for foreign media.The UN General Assembly passed a [nonbinding resolution](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-resolution-urging-immediate-gaza-ceasefire-passes-with-overwhelming-majority/) on Friday demanding an immediate halt to hostilities in Gaza, which made no mention of Hamas. The passage of the resolution was [hailed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-hails-un-resolution-calling-for-ceasefire-demands-its-immediate-implementation/) by the terror group.

As for Haniyeh’s request to open a humanitarian corridor into Gaza, Israel has allowed over 170 trucks carrying food and medicine to enter the blockaded Strip over the past two weeks.

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Jerusalem has, however, not allowed the transfer of fuel, claiming that the terror group will use it to operate its weapons system and to ensure its members can continue to hide in a vast network of underground tunnels and bunkers, which need electricity and ventilation.

The IDF revealed on October 24 that Hamas possesses [its own vast fuel reserves](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-gaza-photos-show-half-million-liters-of-fuel-held-by-hamas/), a claim that was [confirmed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/arab-western-officials-agree-hamas-keeping-gaza-food-fuel-for-itself-ny-times/) by Western and Arab officials to the New York Times last week. The terror group has also allegedly been stockpiling food and oil, keeping it from Gazan residents who are in desperate need. A senior Lebanese official told the newspaper that Hamas has enough supplies to sustain fighting for three to four months without a need for resupply.

Reports have emerged that the terror group has also [stolen humanitarian aid](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-refugee-agency-says-hamas-stole-fuel-and-medications-from-its-gaza-premises/) delivered to the UNRWA, the UN agency that provides for Palestinian refugees in Gaza and their descendants, as well as fuel.

In his statement, Hamas leader Haniyeh also praised the support provided to the terror group by movements in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, with reference to attacks against Israel over the past three weeks by Iran-backed groups in the region, namely the [Houthis](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/yemens-houthi-rebels-claim-to-launch-major-drone-attack-on-israel/) in Yemen, [Hezbollah](https://www.timesofisrael.com/on-lebanons-border-idf-reservists-prepare-for-potential-fight-against-hezbollah/) in Lebanon and various paramilitary factions in [Syria](https://www.memri.org/reports/signs-iran-will-open-front-against-israel-syrian-golan-heights).

The war was sparked on October 7, when some 3,000 terrorists led by Hamas burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

The vast majority of those killed as terrorists seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists.

According to the Hamas-run health ministry, more than 9,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which could not be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

Fifteen soldiers were killed in fighting deep inside the Gaza Strip in the course of Tuesday, Israeli authorities announced Wednesday, and another was killed by mortar fire on the border on Wednesday, the IDF said, as leaders warned of the “heavy toll” being paid by troops to eliminate the Hamas terror group.

Israeli forces continued to attack targets overnight and through Wednesday from the ground and air, killing dozens of members of the terror group, the Israel Defense Forces said.

Activity appeared to be focused in Jabaliya, a Hamas stronghold on the outskirts of Gaza City pounded by airstrikes overnight and again during the day Wednesday.

Eleven soldiers from the Givati Infantry Brigade’s Tzabar Battalion were killed when a Namer armored personnel carrier they were in was hit by an anti-tank guided missile fired by Hamas, the IDF said.

Another four soldiers were wounded in the same incident, including one seriously.

The 11 were named as Sgt. Adi Danan, 20, from Yavne; Staff Sgt. Halel Solomon, 20, from Dimona; Staff Sgt. Erez Mishlovsky, 20, from Oranit; Staff Sgt. Adi Leon, 20, from Nili; Cpl. Ido Ovadia, 19, from Tel Aviv; Cpl. Lior Siminovich, 19, from Herzliya; Staff Sgt. Roei Dawi, 20, from Jerusalem; Lt. Pedayah Mark, 22, from Otniel; Staff Sgt. Roei Saragosti, 20, from Ramat Hanegev Regional Council; Staff Sgt. Itay Yehuda, 20, from Rishon Lezion; and Staff Sgt. Shay Arvas, 20, from Holon

Two more soldiers from the 77th Battalion of the 7th Armored Brigade — Lt. Ariel Reich, 24, from Jerusalem and Cpl. Asif Luger, 21, from Yagur — were killed when their tank drove over an explosive device. Another two troops were seriously hurt in the same incident.

Also Tuesday, a soldier from Givati’s Rotem Battalion was seriously wounded in separate clashes with terrorists in the Gaza Strip, the IDF said. On Wednesday, two soldiers of the Paratrooper’s 101st Battalion were also seriously wounded during battles with Hamas.

Mark was the son of Rabbi Michael Mark, who was killed [in a 2016 West Bank shooting attack](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-israelis-badly-hurt-in-shooting-attack-near-hebron/). He was moderately hurt in that attack

On Tuesday night, the IDF announced that Staff Sgt. Roei Wolf, 20, from Ramat Gan, and Staff Sgt. Lavi Lipshitz, 20, from Modiin, who both served in the Givati Infantry Brigade’s reconnaissance unit, had been killed. The army said early Wednesday that the two died when a building they were in was hit by an RPG.

The soldier killed by mortar fire on Wednesday was named as Sgt. First Class (res.) Shalev Zion Sharabi, 22, a combat medic in the 749th Battalion of the Bislamach Brigade, from Teneh Omarim. He was hit near the southern community of Be’eri.

The casualty toll underlined the threats soldiers are facing as the army shifts to fraught urban combat in Gaza’s crowded streets after weeks of a punishing air campaign. The urban combat zone is thought to be awash in bombs and booby traps and undercut by a vast network of tunnels used by terrorists to ambush or surprise troops.

“The loss of IDF soldiers in battles with Hamas terrorists in Gaza is a severe and painful blow,” Defense Minister Yoav Gallant posted on X, formerly Twitter, on Wednesday morning, sending his condolences to the families of the fallen.

“Our significant achievements in the powerful fighting deep in the Strip are taking, to our sorrow, a heavy toll,” he said. But he vowed that Israel was ready for a long and complex operation.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to continue Israel’s war on Hamas despite the deaths.

“We have so many important achievements, but also painful losses. We know that every soldier of ours is an entire world,” Netanyahu said.

Israeli air power continued to provide cover for troops and tanks battling inside the enclave. Overnight Tuesday, ground forces directed the Air Force to strike a building in Jabaliya where a number of Hamas operatives were gathered, the IDF said. The army said ground forces also spotted a car with an anti-tank guided missile driving toward them in northern Gaza, and directed an aircraft to strike it.

Forces, including ground troops, struck dozens of Hamas targets overnight, the army said.

The Air Force also carried out strikes against Hamas command centers and other terror cells, it said.

Since the beginning of the war, some 11,000 sites belonging to Hamas and other terror groups have been hit, the IDF said Wednesday.

Later Wednesday, the IDF published several videos it said highlighted the close coordination between land, sea and air forces in the battle.

It said that intelligence gathered on the ground was being immediately transferred to the air and naval forces to carry out combined attacks.

The army said that the combined attacks had helped “destroy dozens of Hamas terror targets including observation towers, anti-tank missile cells, ships and military posts. In addition, terrorists have been killed, and infiltrations into Israel and terror attacks thwarted.”

Footage showed troops moving door to door through ruined, rubble-strewn neighborhoods, tanks firing at what appeared to be open fields, and bombs being dropped on an unidentified object behind other bombed-out buildings.

Al-Jazeera television, one of the few media outlets still reporting from northern Gaza, aired footage of devastation in Jabaliya and of several wounded people, including children, being brought to a nearby hospital. The Hamas-run government said the strikes killed and wounded many people, but the exact toll was not yet known.

The Al-Jazeera footage showed nearly identical scenes as the day before, with dozens of men digging through the gray rubble of demolished multistory buildings in search of survivors.

According to the Hamas-run health ministry, more than 8,700 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which could not be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and it also does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. The terror group has pushed back against such claims, releasing an unverified list of names it says represent those killed. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

As the fighting raged, Palestinians in Gaza appeared to be plunged back into a communications blackout Wednesday morning, days after service was restored following US pressure.

Palestinian telecom providers Paltel and Jawwal told The Associated Press early Wednesday that there was a communication blackout.

Internet-access advocacy group NetBlocks.org confirmed that Gaza “is in the midst of a total or near-total telecoms blackout.”

It said the disruption was consistent with an earlier blackout imposed from late Friday to early Sunday, which coincided with the entry of large numbers of ground troops into Gaza in what Israel at the time described as a new stage in the war.

US media reported that the original blackout only ended after the White House pressured Israel to restore the networks.

Israel has not commented on either blackout.

Wednesday’s blackout, which eased after several hours, ensured that details of the ongoing fighting beyond IDF releases were sparse, with entry in and out of Strip essentially severed. At the same time, Egypt and Hamas opened the Rafah crossing for the first time since the war erupted, allowing out hundreds of foreign passport holder and dozens of severely wounded Gazans.

The war was sparked on October 7, when some 2,500 terrorists led by Hamas burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing at least 245 hostages of all ages under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

The vast majority of those killed as terrorists seized border communities were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and over 260 people were slaughtered at an outdoor festival, many amid horrific acts of brutality by the terrorists

After weeks of punishing airstrikes, Israel has shifted in recent days to a ground offensive. On Tuesday evening, IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari described the fighting as “complex close-quarters combat.”

Hagari said troops were fighting terrorists heroically and courageously. “This is a dangerous conflict. It has a price,” he said. “It is complex, but it is essential to our capacity to achieve the aims of the war.

Israel has been vague about its operations in Gaza, but residents and spokesmen for terror groups say troops appear to be trying to take control of the two main north-south roads, The Associated Press reported.

In recent days, Israeli troops have advanced toward the outskirts of Gaza City from the north and east. Israeli officials say Hamas’s military infrastructure, including hundreds of kilometers (miles) of tunnels, is concentrated in the city, which was home to some 650,000 people before the war.

On Tuesday, massive blasts leveled parts of the Jabaliya residential area on the outskirts of Gaza City, in what the IDF later confirmed was a targeted attack on a Hamas commander and infrastructure belonging to the terror group’s Central Jabaliya Battalion. The IDF said shortly afterward that it had killed the commander of Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion, Ibrahim Biari, in an airstrike that was part of “a wide-scale strike” on Hamas operatives and infrastructure belonging to the Central Jabaliya Battalion.

The military said the strikes that killed Biari and several other terrorists caused underground terror tunnels to collapse, bringing down several nearby buildings.

According to the IDF, Biari was one of the Hamas commanders responsible for directing members of the terror group’s elite Nukhba forces to invade Israel on October 7

Hamas claimed multiple Israeli airstrikes had leveled several apartment blocks and the Hamas-run health ministry said 50 people were killed, a claim which could not be independently verified. It initially claimed a death toll of 400.

According to the IDF, the Central Jabaliya Battalion had taken control of several civilian buildings in the area, and many of those killed in the strikes were Hamas operatives.

Nevertheless, the strikes drew sharp rebukes from Arab nations.

Saudi Arabia on Wednesday denounced the strike “in the strongest terms possible,” decrying the “inhumane targeting” of the site “by the Israeli occupation forces.”

Egypt and Jordan issued similarly strong condemnations, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Israel was “completely out of its mind,” accusing it of crimes against humanity.

The IDF has repeatedly called on civilians to move south for their safety.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned because Israel is also carrying out airstrikes in the south.

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties and urging the civilian population to evacuate to southern Gaza.

With all the attendant terrible dangers, the war against Hamas is finally being fought deep in enemy territory.

Following three weeks of airstrikes targeting Hamas after its horrific slaughter of 1,400 people across southwest Israel on October 7, the IDF has gradually stepped up its ground offensive, with the declared goal of destroying Hamas’s military and governance capabilities.

The task is extraordinarily complex. Hamas, an Islamic death cult terrorist-army, was allowed for years to indoctrinate, train and arm tens of thousands of savage murderers. It has built a vast underground operations network, much of which has proved impervious to the IAF strikes and from where its gunmen are now seeking to repel the widening IDF incursion. After the unbearable losses of October 7, and amid the ongoing wrenching nightmare of 240 hostages, from babies and toddlers to the elderly and infirm, Israel is now adding to the terrible toll soldiers killed in the Gaza death trap.

The offensive is immensely hamstrung by Hamas’s predictably cynical use of Gazans as human shields. How much support Hamas maintains among ordinary Gazans is broadly unknowable, but plainly many noncombatants are being prevented by the terror-government from leaving the northern Gaza combat areas. Thus the IDF, which has pleaded daily for noncombatants to evacuate, cannot be certain whether it is encountering terrorists or civilians as it pushes deeper into the urban warzone

As the political and military leadership has [stressed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hanegbi-says-gazans-should-avoid-hospitals-in-north-urges-egypt-to-accept-injured/) repeatedly, this will be a long, hard and painful war. But for all the public’s raw pain and lost faith in both those political and military establishments, and all the abiding divisions within Israel over how we reached this darkest hour in our modern history, the IDF has near-universal national support, its troops are highly motivated and dedicated, and its commanders and the emergency war coalition are resolute that the mission must be completed — that it must not end until Hamas is defanged.**By our side**

Domestically riven, with an unprecedentedly hardline government seeking to neuter the judiciary, Israel was plunged into this conflict from a parlous position.

Internationally, too, the anti-Arab, pro-annexation, Jewish supremacist outlook of key ministers, setting the tone for the coalition, was hardly conducive to maximal support when Israel has most needed it.

Nonetheless, some allies have proven steadfast — and most importantly the US, with its Zionist president ready to overlook the open derision that members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition had been expressing for him and his administration.

Conscious, too, that this Israel-Hamas war is already a multi-front conflict and that it has the potential to explode into full-scale war in the region and beyond, US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken are basically holding Israel’s hand in the fight — deploying ever-more military resources to the region, shuttling and phoning, even participating in the deliberations of Israel’s war cabinet.

“You may be strong enough on your own to defend yourself,” Blinken [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/blinken-in-tel-aviv-as-long-as-us-exists-israel-wont-have-to-defend-itself-alone/) in Tel Aviv in the early days of the war, “but as long as America exists, you will never, ever have to. We will always be there by your side.”

Manifestly, it is a supreme Israeli interest to retain that military and diplomatic American partnership. It is ultimately the US, and the US alone, that can resist international pressure to halt the offensive against Hamas, and the US, alone, that can deter, and if necessary engage, should Iran elect to widen the war.

A little belatedly, Netanyahu seems to have realized that US calls to boost humanitarian aid for Gaza noncombatants are worth heeding: In what he has defined as a war between the civilized world and barbarians, the forces of civilization need to act and be seen to be acting humanely.

### Pro-Hamas agitators, Diaspora fears

This war has, of course, already spread far beyond the region in terms of public opinion and action, with immense implications for Diaspora Jews — [many of whom](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-hamas-sentiment-shocks-european-jews-rekindling-fears-about-their-future/) feel themselves in [increased peril](https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-attacks-uk-jewish-leaders-share-worries-about-israel-as-a-safe-haven-for-jews/) — and indeed for would-be enlightened countries with emboldened anti-Israel and pro-Hamas agitatorsFourteen hundred slaughtered in Israel is “so last month” for a mounting swath of the watching world — some motivated by ancient hatreds, some just too weak-willed to employ a modicum of intellectual rigor and honesty.

Endless ongoing rocket fire, launched indiscriminately across Israel, sending much of the population rushing for safety multiple times each day, making schooling near-impossible and tanking the economy, is deemed marginal

The fact that Hamas operates from beneath and around Gaza’s hospitals and mosques and churches and schools is forgettable. That it uses Gaza’s civilians as cover and protection is old news.

But its false claims that Israel deliberately targets those civilians, and its immediate efforts to blame Israel for incidents with civilian casualties, are instantly treated as credible

Israel has never managed effective public diplomacy. And this abidingly dysfunctional government is entirely incapable of doing so.

Just as ordinary Israelis have organized to help the hundreds of thousands of displaced Israelis, from south and north, with almost every aspect of their displaced lives, helped campaign for the hostages, tried to salvage Israeli agriculture and much more, so, too, it is ordinary Israelis who are fighting the public diplomacy battle, doing what they can on social media while utterly outnumbered and under-resourced.

Even in the most straightforward areas of public diplomacy, such as the visits of supportive world leaders, the government is failing to utilize opportunity. As the former IDF operations chief and ex-national security council head Giora Eiland has stressed repeatedly these past weeks, solidarity visits and expressions of support from world leaders are insufficient.

Those leaders should be asked to issue demands on behalf of the Israel they are supporting — to demand that the Red Cross be given access to the hostages, to demand that Shifa Hospital be evacuated, to endorse Israel’s call for northern Gaza’s noncombatants to head south and be allowed to head south, to demand a halt to the indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza.

The way things stand, Eiland lamented in an Army Radio interview on Wednesday morning, most of the international community is not remotely invested in Israel’s survival and its citizens’ well-being: “Jews are killed and the world [merely] mourns.”

As he said in another interview, last week, “Jews have the right to *live*, too.

Thirty-four journalists have been killed in the war between Israel and the Hamas terror group, an international media freedom group said Wednesday, accusing both sides of committing possible war crimes.

Reporters Without Borders called on International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutors to investigate the deaths. The organization said it had already filed a complaint regarding eight Palestinian journalists it claimed were killed in Israel’s bombardment of the Gaza Strip, and an Israeli journalist murdered during Hamas’s October 7 onslaught in southern Israel.

However, more than one Israeli journalist was killed in the Hamas assault. [Ynet photographer Roee Idan](https://www.timesofisrael.com/roee-idan-43-photographer-captured-first-moments-of-hamas-assault/) was murdered in his hometown of Kfar Aza, [Israel Hayom photographer Yaniv Zohar](https://www.timesofisrael.com/yaniv-zohar-54-news-photographer-and-family-murdered-son-escaped/) was murdered in Nahal Oz along with his wife and two daughters, and [Kan news editor Ayelet Arnin](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ayelet-arnin-22-kan-news-editor-killed-at-music-festival/) and [Maariv reporter Shai Regev](https://www.timesofisrael.com/shai-regev-25-gossip-reporters-final-story-was-about-bruno-mars/) were murdered at the Nova music festival near Re’im.

The scale, seriousness and recurring nature of international crimes targeting journalists, particularly in Gaza, calls for a priority investigation by the ICC prosecutor,” Christophe Deloire, director-general of the group also known by the French abbreviation RSF, said. The organization is headquartered in France.

It’s the third such complaint to be filed by the group since 2018 alleging war crimes against Palestinian journalists in Gaza.

Israel says it makes every effort to avoid killing civilians and accuses Hamas of putting them at risk by operating in residential areas, refusing repeated calls to allow civilians to evacuate to designated safe zones, and launching thousands of rockets at Israel, hundreds of which are believed to have misfired and landed in Gaza during the current war.

The organization said its latest complaint also cites “the deliberate, total or partial, destruction of the premises of more than 50 media outlets in Gaza” since Israel declared war with the aim of rooting out the Hamas terror group, which openly seeks Israel’s destruction and has ruled the Strip since taking over in a bloody 2007 coup.

Another media freedom organization, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), said Wednesday that it was investigating reports of journalists “killed, injured, detained or missing” in the war, including in Lebanon. It said its preliminary death toll was at least 31 journalists and media workers.

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“CPJ emphasizes that journalists are civilians doing important work during times of crisis and must not be targeted by warring parties,” said Sherif Mansour, the New York-based nonprofit’s Middle East and North Africa program coordinator.

The ICC’s prosecution office is already investigating the actions of Israeli and Palestinian authorities dating back to Operation Protective Edge against Hamas in 2014. The probe — which Israel views as illegitimate since it was set up in a way that avoids probing Hamas’s kidnapping and murdering of three Israeli teenagers, which sparked that war — can also consider allegations of crimes committed during the current war.

During a visit to the Rafah border crossing on Sunday, International Criminal Court Prosecutor Karim Khan called on Israel to respect international law but stopped short of accusing the country of war crimes. He called Hamas’s October 7 rampage — when some 2,500 terrorists invaded Israel and killed some 1,400 people, mostly civilians slaughtered in their homes or at a music festival — a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

Israel argues the ICC has no jurisdiction in the conflict because Palestine is not an independent sovereign state. Israel isn’t a party to the treaty that underpins the international court and is not one of its 123 member states.

Reporters Without Borders [said Sunday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/watchdog-group-accuses-israel-of-intentionally-killing-journalists-on-lebanon-border/) that strikes that hit a group of journalists in southern Lebanon earlier this month, killing one, were targeted rather than accidental and that the journalists had clearly been identified as members of the press.

The organization published preliminary conclusions from an ongoing investigation, based on video evidence and witness testimonies, into two strikes that killed Reuters videographer Issam Abdallah and wounded six journalists from Reuters, AFP and Al Jazeera as they were covering clashes on the southern Lebanese border on October 13.

Hamas is willing to extend its truce deal with Israel for four days and release more Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian security prisoners, a source close to the terror group reportedly said Wednesday, as mediators sought a lasting halt to the conflict.

The ongoing truce is scheduled to expire early Thursday after a six-day pause in the conflict, sparked by the deadly Hamas assault that prompted an Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip.

With 61 Israeli hostages and 20 foreign nationals already released and more set to walk free on Wednesday during the truce, Qatari mediators said they were working for a “sustainable” ceasefire.

Hamas on Wednesday “informed the mediators that it is willing to extend the truce for four days,” a source close to the terror group told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Under that arrangement, Hamas “would be able to release Israeli prisoners that it, other resistance movements and other parties hold during this period, according to the terms of the existing truce,”

Israel has agreed to extend the truce, which was originally set to expire on Monday, by 24 hours for every 10 hostages freed, and Hamas is expected to release a sixth group of hostages later Wednesday.Early Wednesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said it had received a list with the names of 10 abducted Israelis that Hamas is slated to release later in the day. It said the families of those on the list have been informed, without giving further details.

Meanwhile, Moussa Abu Marzouk, an official from the Hamas political wing, said the terror group will also release two additional hostages with Russian citizenship in a gesture of “appreciation” for the position taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

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Hamas was believed to be holding eight dual Israeli-Russian citizens. One, Roni Krivoi, was released Sunday.

Relatives of Israeli-Russian hostages being held captive by Hamas in Gaza went to Moscow this week to seek the Kremlin’s assistance in getting their family members released by the terror organization.

Twelve hostages, including 10 Israelis, were released Tuesday, bringing the total number of people freed during the truce to 81

The initial four-day truce started Friday and had been due to expire Monday, when it was extended by two days. The deal, reached last week, provided for the release of 50 Israeli women and children abducted by Hamas during its October 7 attacks, in which 1,200 people were killed, most of them civilians, and more than 240 were taken hostage.

Israel has vowed to resume its military campaign to end Hamas’s 16-year rule of Gaza, but is facing mounting [international pressure](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-idf-should-not-displace-gazans-en-masse-in-the-south-like-it-did-in-the-north/) to extend the truce and to spare south Gaza a devastating ground offensive like the one that has demolished much of the north.

Hamas’s expression of willingness to extend the truce comes a day after Mossad spy agency chief David Barnea was in Doha for talks with CIA Director William Burns, Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed Bin Abdul Rahman al-Thani and other Qatari officials, for expanded discussions on the hostages held by Hamas and other terror factions in Gaza since the October 7 onslaught.

A Qatari source told AFP that the discussions aim “to build on the progress of the extended humanitarian pause agreement and to initiate further discussions about the next phase of a potential deal.”

Burns’s focus was expected to include freeing Americans among the hostages and keeping the releases going overall, which could lead to more male hostages and the first known Israeli security forces members being released, a US official told AP.

The Ynet news site said further that talks could focus on five groups of hostages: female soldiers, men no longer of the age to do reserve duty, IDF reservists, male soldiers, and the bodies of those killed during the October assault and later in captivity.

Meanwhile, Barnea relayed that Israel will not agree to talks on a new hostage deal before the current agreement is fully implemented, and all women and children hostages are released, an Israeli official told Axios on Tuesday.

“It might be possible to reach separate agreements around other groups of hostages but Israel made clear it can only happen after the current deal is fully implemented and all women and children are released,” the official reportedly said.

The original deal stipulated that the truce could be extended by more days — up to a total of 10 days, including the first four — if Hamas releases at least 10 additional hostages each day, with Israel freeing more Palestinian inmates at a ratio of three prisoners for every hostage.

Given the provisions set out in the deal, the truce could potentially extend to Sunday, assuming more Israeli hostages are set free.

Israel would like to see all the remaining women and children held hostage in Gaza released over the coming days. It believes Hamas is still holding 30 to 40 women and children: about 20 women aged 21 to 50, and at least nine children, the youngest of whom is 10-month-old Kfir Bibas, who was taken with his parents and four-year-old brother from Kibbutz Nir Oz on October 7. The Israel Defense Forces said Monday that Hamas transferred the family to another Palestinian terror group in Gaza.

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“We expect to have another two to three days of hostage release and a humanitarian pause, after which either we resume operations in Gaza or potentially reach a follow-on agreement,” an Israeli official told the Washington Post.

The official also predicted most of the abducted children would be freed by Wednesday night, saying Israel was open to weighing Hamas offers for releasing Israeli male hostages and soldiers once all kids and women are returned.

The official stressed, however, that further releases would not “lead to a permanent ceasefire.”

Quoting a senior diplomatic source, Ynet reported that negotiations on extending the temporary truce in Gaza have not included consideration of proposals for extending the pause beyond 10 days, but indicated Israel could be open to the idea.

“If there is a concrete proposal, the cabinet will consider it, but there hasn’t been anything like that. If we see it’s a serious proposal, we’ll look into it,”

The source stressed that Israel remains committed to toppling Hamas, a key aim of its military operation in Gaza.

“If we can get as many hostages out as possible in 10 days, that’s great,” the source said. “Nobody is forgetting the war’s goal and nobody will agree to something ridiculous like disarmament. We already know how much international forces can be relied on.” Channel 12 reported that Israel is expected to be presented with a proposal for all hostages to be freed in exchange for all Palestinian security prisoners, including those convicted of murder and those captured on October 7, and an end to the war, an offer that Jerusalem will reject.

“Our eye remains on the ball,” the network quoted an Israeli source as saying. “Bringing back the hostages and destroying Hamas military and governing capabilities are two complementary goals — one does not replace the other.”

Netanyahu, his war cabinet colleagues and Israel’s security chiefs have all stressed that the twin declared goals of the war — to destroy Hamas and get back all the hostages — will be both be pursued until they are achieved.

The UN Security Council approved a resolution Wednesday calling for “urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout the Gaza Strip” after four failed attempts to respond to the Israel-Hamas war.

The vote was 12-0 with the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia abstaining.

The final draft watered down language from a “demand” to a “call” for humanitarian pauses. It also watered down a demand for “the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups.”

The resolution makes no mention of a ceasefire. It also doesn’t refer to Hamas’s devastating October 7 onslaught on Israel, in which terrorists rampaged through southern communities, killing over 1,200 people, mostly civilians butchered in their homes and at a music festival, and kidnapping some 240 people. Israel then declared war with the aim of toppling the terror group’s regime in Gaza, which it has ruled since 2007.

The Hamas-run Gaza health ministry said Tuesday that 11,500 people had been killed in Gaza since the start of the war, in figures that cannot be independently verified, do not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives, and also include those killed in hundreds of failed Palestinian rocket launches.

Russia proposed an amendment to the resolution before the vote that would have called for durable humanitarian pauses leading to a ceasefire. But it was rejected by a vote of 5-1 with nine abstentions because it failed to get the minimum nine “yes” votesBut the resolution, sponsored by Malta, did bring the 15 members of the UN’s most powerful body together in a first response to the ongoing war that is having catastrophic humanitarian consequences in Gaza.

The resolution asks that “all parties comply with their obligations under international law, notably with regard to the protection of civilians, especially children.”

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Responding to the vote, Israel’s ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan said the resolution “will have no meaning in practice” as Israel “is acting according to international law, while the Hamas terrorists will not read the resolution at all and will not act on it.”

“It is unfortunate that the council continues to ignore and not condemn or even mention the massacre committed by Hamas that led to the war in Gaza. It’s shameful. Israel will continue to act until Hamas is destroyed and the hostages are returned,” Erdan said in a statement.

Israel’s Foreign Ministry also demanded that the Security Council work to free the hostages held in the Strip as well as “condemn Hamas unequivocally and address the need to create a different security reality in Gaza.”

In a statement, the Foreign Ministry said there was “no room for extended humanitarian pauses as long as 239 hostages are still in the hands of Hamas terrorists.”

Several [reports](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-to-weigh-deal-that-would-see-50-hostages-freed-3-day-ceasefire/) Wednesday indicated that there is a potential deal in the works to free a number of captives in exchange for a several-day pause in fighting.

Malta’s UN envoy Vanessa Frazier said before the vote that “the Security Council members are united in wanting a voice.”

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While recognizing the “nuances” between their positions, she said all 15 members have “the desire to save life and provide respite” to civilians.

UN Security Council resolutions are legally binding, but in practice, many parties choose to ignore the council’s requests for action.

Richard Gowan, UN director for the International Crisis Group, said the Security Council has called for ceasefires in wars from the Balkans to Syria “with little or no impact.”

The Security Council, which has the responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, has been paralyzed since the war began by its internal divisions. This is especially the case between China and Russia, which want an immediate ceasefire, and the United States, which has called for humanitarian pauses but [objects](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-vetoes-gaza-war-un-resolution-that-doesnt-stress-israeli-right-to-self-defense/) to any mention of a ceasefire, which its close ally Israel strongly opposes.

“I know we are all disappointed about the inaction of the Council in the past 40 days,” China’s UN ambassador Jun Zhang said earlier Wednesday.

The resolution calls for humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout the Gaza Strip for a “sufficient number of days” for unhindered access by the UN, Red Cross, and other aid groups to get water, electricity, fuel, food, and medical supplies to all those in need. It says the pauses also should allow for the repair of essential infrastructure and enable urgent rescue and recovery efforts.

In the four previous tries for Security Council approval, a Brazil-drafted resolution was vetoed by the United States, a US-drafted resolution was vetoed by Russia and China and two Russian-drafted resolutions failed to get the minimum “yes” votes.

After the fourth failure, frustrated Arab nations turned to the 193-member General Assembly and succeeded in getting wide approval for a resolution calling for a “humanitarian truce” in Gaza meant to lead to a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

It was the first United Nations response to the war. But unlike Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they are a barometer of world opinion.

The vote was 120-14 with 45 abstentions. Of the five veto-holding Security Council members, Russia, China, and France voted in favor, the United States voted against and Britain abstained.

The General Assembly resolution was adopted on October 27, and Israel agreed on November 9 to four-hour pauses. But only limited aid has been delivered to Gaza through the Rafah crossing from Egypt, and a humanitarian crisis has been brewing.

The Crisis Group’s Gowan said US opposition to a ceasefire “is a gift that keeps on giving for Russia diplomatically.” He said that while many diplomats think Russia is demanding a cease-fire “for largely cynical reasons to make the Americans look bad,” Moscow’s position “is closer to the mainstream of council thinking, and the US looks isolated.”

“A UN cease-fire call would embarrass but not really constrain the Israelis,” he told the AP. “But the US clearly feels that even such a symbolic move is too much of a political risk.

WASHINGTON — US Secretary of State Antony Blinken aims to build support for humanitarian pauses in the fighting in Gaza during his second trip to the Middle East since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, US officials told The Times of Israel on Thursday as the Biden administration’s top diplomat departed for the region with a difficult task ahead.

Blinken will need to convince both Israel and Washington’s Arab allies, whose foreign ministers he is planning to meet at a summit the State Department is organizing in the Jordanian capital Amman on Saturday, a senior Arab diplomat and a US official said on condition of anonymity.

The Biden administration is pitching “temporary and localized” humanitarian pauses to increase the flow of aid in the Strip and to more safely evacuate civilians out of harm’s way, a second US official said, adding that they could also give Hamas an opportunity to get a better account of the roughly 240 hostages it kidnapped into Gaza during its October 7 onslaught, in which the terrorists massacred 1,400 people in Israel, most of them civilians slaughtered amid brutal atrocities.

The hostages are believed to be scattered in tunnels throughout the Hamas-run enclave, with some of them held by Palestinian Islamic Jihad and possibly other terrorists, and Hamas has at times claimed not to know where they all are. If Hamas doesn’t have a clear idea of where all the hostages are amid the chaos caused by the fighting, it’s harder for it to hold negotiations over their release, the official said.

In the meantime, Reuters reported that the US is flying surveillance drones over the Gaza Strip to help gather intelligence on the locations of the hostages, which are believed to include roughly 10 Americans.

The humanitarian pauses do allow for Hamas to regroup militarily, which the Biden administration does not want. But as it tries to keep the humanitarian situation in the Strip from collapsing entirely, dragging much of its regional agenda down with it, the US official speaking to The Times of Israel said the approach was necessary for Washington to pursue.

Blinken will need to do a lot of convincing, though, as Israel has yet to embrace the idea of humanitarian pauses, convinced that Hamas will only buckle if squeezed sufficiently by the IDF’s intensifying ground invasion, which has been backed by plenty of firepower from the air. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office issued a swift denial Thursday of a New York Times report claiming he was prepared to consider humanitarian pauses

### Pressure to cease bombing areas where Gazans told to flee

But even before it tries to coax Israel to temporarily halt its counter-offensive in Gaza, declaredly aimed at eliminating Hamas’s military and governance capabilities, the Biden administration has been privately pressing Israel to limit its airstrikes in the enclave’s south, arguing that the IDF has less legitimacy to be targeting that area of the Strip after telling civilians to evacuate there from the north, a US and an Israeli official told The Times of Israel.

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The Israeli official said the IDF strikes have focused mostly on northern Gaza where a larger proportion of Hamas strongholds are located. However, it reserves the right to target the terror group anywhere in the Strip after the October 7 massacres inside Israel, the official clarified.

The Israeli official highlighted the IDF’s demarcation of a humanitarian zone in southwest Gaza where international aid is being provided to those who have fled following the military’s directive for Palestinians to evacuate the northern part of the Strip.

But the US official retorted that this zone has not been clearly designated by Israel and is far too small to house Gaza’s entire population of 2.3 million people, leaving the vast majority of them still exposed to the IDF’s massive aerial bombardment.

The US official clarified that Washington recognizes that Hamas is operating from within and underneath civilian populations throughout the entirety of Gaza. However, the US is concerned about the ballooning number of civilian casualties, which complicates the administration’s ability to continue supporting Israel’s military operation while also rallying allies to follow suit,

### Uphill battle to move Arab world from ceasefire to pause

Meanwhile, Washington’s Arab partners will need to be pushed from the other direction in order to back humanitarian pauses, given that they are overwhelmingly demanding a more immediate and sustained ceasefire.

Arguably the most ardent backer of the ceasefire is Jordan, which submitted a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly last week that called for an end to the fighting in Gaza. Blinken will arrive in Jordan on Friday evening after spending the day in Israel.

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While in Amman, Blinken will participate in a ministerial summit with a group of Arab counterparts on Saturday, which he will use to rally regional partners behind as many of the Biden administration’s policies regarding the Israel-Hamas war as possible, the US official said.

The official pointed to Washington’s calls for humanitarian pauses, increasing humanitarian aid, rejecting the permanent displacement of Palestinians and opposing a permanent Israeli occupation in Gaza as some of the stances that Arab allies could support, while adding that the Biden administration is aiming to reach agreements with participating countries regarding these issues before the summit, so that it doesn’t end without a diplomatic achievement.

The invite list for the summit has not yet been finalized, the US official clarified, while a State Department spokesperson declined to comment on the matter.

In the US as well, calls for a ceasefire are slowly spreading from a vocal far-left flank of the Democratic party.

Dick Durbin became the first US senator to express support for a ceasefire on Thursday while clarifying that it must include the release of all hostages in the Hamas-run enclave.

Durbin’s condition set him apart from the 18 Democrats from the far-left flank of his party who signed onto a resolution calling for a ceasefire, which made no mention of those kidnapped into Gaza. The Biden administration has thus far rejected the ceasefire approach, saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas, leaving it functioning and capable of terrorizing Israelis in the future.

Even within the administration, there’s been growing discomfort with US President Joe Biden’s continued support of Israel’s military campaign, as the images of destruction from Gaza continue to pile up, two sources familiar with the matter said. However, they clarified that the dissent has largely been limited to mid-to-low-level State Department officials who work on humanitarian and conflict resolution issues and who aren’t responsible for setting policy.

US Vice President Kamala Harris swatted away at calls to rein Israel in, telling reporters in London on Thursday, “We are not going to create any conditions on the support that we are giving Israel to defend itself.”

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She also said, “We are not telling Israel how it should conduct this war,” but The Times of Israel’s aforementioned reporting has shown a more nuanced US approach in private.

### Day-after strategizing

Before departing for Tel Aviv on Thursday, Blinken told reporters that civilians have been “bear[ing] the brunt” of Israel’s military campaign targeting Hamas in Gaza and that in Israel he will be discussing “concrete steps” the IDF can take in order to protect civilians — some of the most forceful comments he has made yet, as the death count in Gaza crossed 9,000, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry. Those numbers cannot be independently verified and do, however, include Palestinian terrorists as well as civilians killed by errant rockets fired by terror groups in Gaza.

Still, Blinken reiterated that Israel has a right and obligation to defend itself so that its people are not again massacred by Hamas.

The secretary also acknowledged that Hamas is “quite literally” the reason why civilians have been caught in the crossfire due to the terror group’s use of human shields and its placement of military infrastructure underneath or inside hospitals, schools and mosques.

Blinken said he has five main agenda items for his trip to the region: Strategizing with Israel about its military campaign; ensuring that the war doesn’t spread to additional fronts; continuing efforts to get more humanitarian aid into Gaza; helping evacuate all American citizens and foreign nationals who want to leave Gaza; securing the release of the hostages; and setting the conditions for an eventual two-state solution after the war is over.

In discussing Israel’s strategy for the war, Blinken will again press Jerusalem to start laying out its “day-after” scenario, a US official said.

Israel has thus far refused to publicly entertain the question of who will govern Gaza if it succeeds in its goal of toppling Hamas. Even privately, formal discussions have not escalated above the bureaucratic level of the various relevant ministries,

The vacuum has been filled by the US, which has jumped in to declare on Wednesday that it would like to see a “revitalized” Palestinian Authority return to ruling Gaza, with countries in the region and international agencies possibly playing an interim role until Ramallah is ready.

The proposal is part of the Biden administration’s desire to seize the opportunity created by the ongoing crisis to re-unify the West Bank and Gaza under the same governing body, thereby advancing a two-state vision.

Israel has given no indication that it would be interested in such a framework, particularly given its current hardline government, which continues to take steps to weaken Hamas’s more moderate PA rival. However, the right-wing coalition is viewed by many in Israel as having failed to protect the country on October 7, opening up the possibility that it will eventually be replaced by a more moderate group of parties.

The Israel Defense Forces on Thursday afternoon announced the death of a senior officer during fighting in Gaza, bringing the military’s death toll to 18 since Tuesday, and 333 since the beginning of the war.

The army said ground forces and tanks clashed with Hamas terror cells in the northern Gaza Strip overnight, killing dozens of operatives, in what The Times of Israel has learned was an intense and chaotic midnight battle that raged on for over three hours following an ambush targeting soldiers from Golani’s 13th Battalion.

taken part in “prolonged battles” against Hamas terrorists who had fired missiles, set off explosive devices, and hurled grenades at the forces.

The Hamas gunmen tried to ambush the Israeli force at midnight, emerging from tunnels and attacking them with anti-tank missiles, mortars, and drones. They tried to enter the armored personnel carriers and take control of them. More than 20 terrorists were believed to have been killed and several managed to escape, while there were no Israeli fatalities in that fight.

The military said the Golani troops fought back, assisted by artillery and tank shelling, and calling in an airstrike and missile strikes by the Navy.

“At the end of the fighting, dozens of terrorists were killed,”

The military said that troops of the Nahal Infantry Brigade also encountered a group of Hamas gunmen who opened fire at them, and directed an aircraft to strike and kill the terror cell.

Reservist forces, meanwhile, directed an aircraft to strike an anti-tank squad, with navy support, according to the IDF.

The IDF said it has continued to strike Hamas sites in the Gaza Strip, including weapons manufacturing and storage facilities, anti-tank missile launching positions, and drone launching positions.

Later Thursday, the IDF’s Military Intelligence Directorate said its so-called “targets center” had identified some 1,200 new Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip amid the ongoing ground offensive that began last week.

The Military Intelligence Directorate is using artificial intelligence and automated tools to “produce reliable targets quickly and accurately,”

The IDF said hundreds of soldiers were working to produce new targets “on a large scale.”A senior intelligence officer said that “in war, the enemy behaves differently and creates new opportunities.”

The senior officer said other new tools were being used for the first time to immediately provide ground forces in Gaza with updated information on targets to strike.

So far, the IDF said it has struck more than 12,000 targets in the Strip.

The operations haven’t come without losses to Israeli forces. The army has previously confirmed the deaths of 17 soldiers in or near the Strip since Tuesday morning, and on Thursday afternoon announced that Lt. Col. Salman Habaka, 33, the commander of the 188th Armored Brigade’s 53rd Battalion, from Yanuh-Jat, was killed battling Hamas terrorists in the northern part of Gaza.

Habaka is the most senior officer to have been killed during the IDF’s ground operation in the Gaza Strip. No further details were given on the circumstances of his death.

Separately, a reservist of the 679th Yiftah Brigade, a Givati soldier, and a Combat Engineering soldier, were seriously wounded in overnight operations in the northern part of Gaza.

Additionally, a soldier of the Border Defense Corps’ Caracal Battalion was seriously wounded in an incident on the Egyptian border. No further details were given on the circumstances.

Previously, 11 troops were killed when a Namer armored personnel carrier they were in was hit by an anti-tank missile. Two others died when an RPG was fired at a building they were in. Two were killed when their tank drove over an explosive device, another was killed by mortar fire on the border, and one died during clashes with Hamas gunmen.

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The casualties underlined the threats soldiers are facing as the army shifts to fraught urban combat in Gaza’s crowded streets after weeks of a punishing air campaign. The urban combat zone is thought to be awash with bombs and booby traps and undercut by a vast network of tunnels used by terrorists to ambush or surprise troops.

Some of the fatalities came during a major IDF assault Tuesday on Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion compound, located in the Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza. Israel is battling to destroy Hamas and end its rule over the Strip after the group’s devastating terror attack earlier this month that killed over 1,400 people in Israel, mostly civilians.

According to a report Thursday by the Ynet news site, [Hamas sent a group of 100 women and children](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-accuses-hamas-of-using-over-100-women-and-children-as-human-shields-in-gaza/) to act as human shields to protect the compound.

“We are prepared for more incidents of such cynical and blatant use of the population,” said an unnamed IDF officer who apparently witnessed the incident.

The report did not say how troops dealt with the situation, but the compound was captured by the IDF.

Meanwhile, rocket fire by Palestinian terrorists appeared to taper off slightly, as terror groups presumably prepare for a long battle.

Among the targets on Thursday were Ashdod and largely evacuated Gaza border towns. There were no reports of direct impacts or injuries.

Also on Thursday, IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said the military had notified the families of 242 hostages that their loved ones were being held in the Gaza Strip, up by two from the previous tally.

He said the number was not final as the military investigates new information.

The number does not include four released hostages — mother and daughter Judith and Natalie Ra’anan, and elderly women Yocheved Lifshitz and Nurit Cooper — or Pvt. Ori Megidish, who was rescued by the IDF on Sunday night, meaning at least 247 people were taken hostage on October 7.

There are still dozens more missing people whose fates are currently unknown. Out of the confirmed captives, it isn’t clear how many are alive. Hamas is also believed to be holding two Israeli civilians who entered the Strip in 2015, as well as the bodies of two IDF soldiers killed in 2014.

Israel declared war, with the aim of eradicating Hamas, following the terror group’s devastating October 7 onslaught, in which civilians were brutally murdered or abducted from their homes and from the site of a music festival. A top Hamas official has said that given the chance, the Palestinian terror group [would repeat such massacres again and again](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/).

Meanwhile in Gaza, the Hamas-run health ministry has claimed that more than 9,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war, and more than 22,000 people have been wounded. The figure, which could not be confirmed, would be without precedent in decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned because Israel is also carrying out airstrikes in the south.

Foreigners and dual nationals started exiting Gaza via the Rafah border crossing with Egypt on Wednesday and this continued on Thursday, with Egypt’s foreign ministry saying it will help evacuate “about 7,000″ people representing “more than 60” nationalities.

Hamas authorities claimed Thursday morning that the power generator of the Indonesian Hospital in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip had gone out of service.

Gaza health officials have been warning that hospitals were in imminent danger of closing since the first days of the war.

Health ministry spokesperson Ashraf Al-Qudra said in a televised statement that the Indonesian Hospital was running on a smaller backup generator but had to turn off lights in most rooms, shut down oxygen generators and resort to oxygen cylinders, and turn off mortuary refrigerators.

“These exceptional measures will allow the Indonesian Hospital to work for a matter of days,” Al-Qudra said. “However, if we cannot secure electricity or fuel then we will face a disaster.”

While some aid trucks have entered the blockaded Gaza Strip since the war began last month, Israel has not allowed trucks to bring fuel, which Hamas needs to run the ventilation and electricity in its vast tunnel network.

Israel says that Hamas has hundreds of thousands of liters of fuel that it could supply to hospitals and other civilians. The IDF on Wednesday released a recording of an intelligence intercept of a conversation in which a Hamas commander repeatedly alludes to Hamas taking fuel from Indonesian Hospital’s stocks.

The Palestine Telecommunications Company, Paltel, says that there has again been “a complete interruption of all communications and internet services” in the Gaza Strip, as Israel moves forward with its offensive in the enclave against Hamas terrorists.

In a statement on the social media platform X, Paltel says that international access has been severed

The leaders in charge of directing Israel’s war in Gaza vowed Saturday to soldier on with the grinding military offensive aimed at vanquishing the Hamas terror group, pushing back at international pressure to slow down or halt it, and pledging to “stand firm against the world if necessary.”

In a joint press conference, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Minister Benny Gantz rejected mounting international criticism over the civilian costs of the war, urging Western leaders to throw their support behind the Jewish state since its victory would mean victory for the entire free world as well.

Netanyahu slammed French President Emmanuel Macron over remarks he made castigating Israel a day earlier. He also indicated that Israel would oppose the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza following the war — a goal [declaredly](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/blinken-postwar-gaza-should-have-no-israeli-occupation-or-blockade/) sought by Washington — lambasting it as an entity that educates children to want to eliminate Israel, supports terrorism and hasn’t condemned Hamas’s October 7 massacres, which sparked the ongoing war. And he said Israel would retain overall security control in the enclave.

The pushback came after several countries over the weekend expressed concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the civilian casualties in the Strip.

On Friday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [urged](https://www.timesofisrael.com/blinken-says-far-too-many-palestinians-have-been-killed-in-israel-hamas-war/) for more to be done to protect civilians in Gaza and ensure humanitarian aid reaches them, saying that “far too many Palestinians have been killed” during the war

And Macron [said Friday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/macron-israel-must-stop-bombing-civilians-pm-says-hamas-responsible-for-their-deaths/) that there was “no justification” for Israel’s alleged bombing of “these babies, these ladies, these old people,” reiterating his call for a ceasefire in Gaza and telling the BBC: “There is no reason for that and no legitimacy. So we do urge Israel to stop.”

In the Saturday evening press conference, Netanyahu urged worldwide backing for his opposition to a ceasefire that doesn’t include a return of the hundreds of hostages being held in Gaza by Palestinian terrorists, and called on Americans to join the demand for the destruction of Hamas, which he said poses a danger to them too. He charged that most Americans share that realization.

He noted that in some countries, there are those who are pressuring the leaders to push for a ceasefire, an apparent reference to mass pro-Palestinian demonstrations calling for such a move, such as a [mass rally Saturday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/many-thousands-march-against-israel-in-london-on-armistice-day-demand-gaza-ceasefire/) in London.

“Don’t cave to the pressure,” Netanyahu said. “Our war is your war. Israel has to win for its own sake and for the world.”

In any case, “no international pressure, no false allegations about IDF soldiers and our state,” he said, will impact Israel’s insistence on protecting itself.

Israel will “stand firm against the world if necessary,” Netanyahu asserted.

Addressing Macron’s criticism, Netanyahu said: “He made a serious mistake, factually and morally. It’s Hamas preventing the evacuation of civilians, not Israel.”

“Israel tells them to leave,” Netanyahu stressed, explaining that Hamas, not Israel, has fired on the humanitarian corridor set up for northern Gazans to evacuate, and that Hamas is using the civilians as human shields.

“It’s not Israel that locates itself in hospitals, in schools, in UNRWA and UN facilities — it’s Hamas. Therefore, it is not Israel but Hamas that is responsible for harm to civilians,” Netanyahu argued.

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If the free world sanctifies the terrorists’ practice of fighting from among civilians, committing the double war crime of targeting and slaughtering civilians while hiding behind their own civilians, then this foul practice will spread, he warned.

“And I say to the president of France and our other friends — it will reach you too,” he said. “Immunity must not given to terrorists who carry out this double war crime. We are truly doing everything to minimize harm to civilians or noncombatants, but we will not give Hamas the license to murder our citizens without our response. We can do without the moral preaching.”

France sought to walk back the remarks Saturday, with a French diplomatic source stressing that Macron had “never implied and does not think that Israeli forces are deliberately targeting civilians. He has been consistently qualifying Hamas’s use of hostages or civilian population as unacceptable blackmail.”

The source also reiterated Macron’s condemnation of the October 7 Hamas onslaught, while also asserting his wish that more be done to alleviate the humanitarian situation.

### No to the PA

In his address, Netanyahu also said the military will remain in Gaza “as long as necessary” to prevent the enclave from being used to launch terror attacks against Israel. “Hamas will be demilitarized; there will be no further threat from the Gaza Strip on Israel, and to ensure that, for all long as necessary, IDF will control Gaza security to prevent terror from there.”

He also indicated Israel would oppose the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza following the war — a goal sought by Washington — as the territory cannot be ruled by “a civil authority that educates its children to hate Israel, to kill Israelis, to eliminate the State of Israel… an authority that pays the families of murderers [amounts] based on the number they murdered… an authority whose leader still has not condemned the terrible [October 7] massacre 30 days later.”

Netanyahu also responded to a [Saturday meeting of Muslim leaders in Riyadh](https://www.timesofisrael.com/muslim-leaders-blast-israeli-crimes-iran-solution-is-palestine-from-river-to-sea/) — including Syria’s President Bashar Assad, Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, among other authoritarians — which served as a platform for scathing criticism of what they alleged were Israel’s violations of international law during the war.

Israel’s intense aerial and ground offensive targeting Hamas infrastructure has killed over 11,000 people, according to the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza. The figure cannot be verified independently and is believed to include members of terror groups and civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rockets. Netanyahu urged Arab heads of state to “take a stand against Hamas,” adding that the terror group had only “brought disaster to Gaza; only bloodshed and poverty.”

Furthermore, it is an integral part of Iran’s axis of terror and evil, he said, and that axis “endangers the whole world and the whole Arab world.”

Netanyahu stated he has been working to ensure international support for the IDF, and declared that in the wake of the Hamas atrocities, “everybody in the free world has a moral obligation to support Israel.”

At Saturday’s summit in Riyadh, speeches and discussions focused on Israel’s actions and ignored the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7, when thousands of Palestinian terrorists slaughtered some 1,200 people, mostly civilians butchered in their homes or at a music festival, and kidnapped at least 244 hostages into Gaza.

The final declaration released at the Riyadh summit Saturday rejected Israel’s assertions that it is acting in self-defense and demanded that the United Nations Security Council adopt “a decisive and binding resolution” to halt Israel’s “aggression.” It also called for an end to weapons sales to Israel and dismissed out of hand any future political resolution to the conflict that would keep Gaza separate from the West Bank.

During the meeting, Mohammed bin Salman, the Gulf kingdom’s de facto ruler, blamed the “occupation, siege and the settlements” for the ongoing conflict and called for their end.

Salman shook hands with Iran’s Raisi, who was on his first trip to Saudi Arabia since the two countries mended ties in March, and said that Islamic countries should designate the Israeli army a “terrorist organization” for its conduct in Gaza.

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Raisi told the summit that the only solution to the conflict is a Palestinian state from the “river to the sea” — meaning an elimination of the State of Israel — and urged sanctions against Jerusalem.

### ‘The people of Israel in 2023 are not in the year 1943’

Speaking after the premier, Gallant similarly hit out at criticism of Israel, in remarks that appeared partly aimed at Macron.

He highlighted the fate of Kfir Bibas, a 10-month-old baby from Kibbutz Nir Oz, who [along with his family was abducted into Gaza](https://www.timesofisrael.com/taken-captive-yarden-and-shiri-bibas-and-their-redheaded-babies/).

Gallant said he has a grandchild the same age, and expressed grave concern for Kfir.

“Who is looking after him… among those savages? A toddler who doesn’t walk yet… We have a supreme obligation to bring the hostages home,” he said.

I hear some [world leaders] and ask myself and ask them: How can you be so bold as to preach morals to us at the height of combat? One thousand and five hundred soldiers, civilians, women and children were abducted or killed… It happened only a month ago. Everyone saw what happened,” Gallant continued.

“I want to say to those European leaders who criticize us: the State of Israel and the people of Israel in 2023 are not in the year 1943,” he added. “We have the means and the obligation to defend ourselves, by ourselves, and that’s what we’ll do. We will not rest until we’ve carried out our mission, and carried it out so that Hamas is defeated.”

“When the war is over, there will be no terror organization called Hamas,” he vowed.

Speaking after Gallant, Gantz addressed regional leaders, emphasizing that the ongoing operation in Gaza was a moral one.

“You need to act so that a different reality will be possible afterward, and so that Gaza will not again be held by those whose hands are covered in the blood of the innocent,” he said.

“It is Hamas that brought ruin upon the residents of Gaza. It should be pressured and attacked, so that the hostages are returned and so that the day will come when the war will be over,” he added.

Referring to Saturday’s summit in Riyadh, Gantz said Israel will not countenance moral preaching from Syria’s Assad, “the slaughterer of his own people” — in reference to the country’s brutal crackdown on rebels and widespread killing of civilians during its civil war — or from “the hangman from Iran,” a reference to Raisi, who oversaw the summary executions of thousands of Iranians in the late 1980s.

“Those who shook hands with the leader of Iran remember what Iran has done,” he said, in an apparent reference to the handshake with the Saudi crown prince.

Regional leaders can help the Palestinians with humanitarian needs, and need to remember “that the reality requires a changed regime in Gaza,”

While Israel agreed in its hostage deal with Hamas to allow at least 200 trucks of humanitarian aid into Gaza for every day of the multi-day truce, the current aid delivery mechanisms the IDF has in place are unlikely to enable this much-needed increase in assistance, two Biden administration officials have told The Times of Israel.

Accordingly, Washington has been pressuring Israel to reopen its Kerem Shalom crossing with Gaza to help facilitate the entry of more aid into the enclave both during the four-day-plus truce and beyond, the administration officials said Wednesday.

Israel has refused to reopen Kerem Shalom since Hamas’s October 7 onslaught and only allowed aid to enter Gaza through Egypt’s Rafah crossing two weeks into the war, arguing that it would not directly supply the Strip with assistance as long as the hostages remained there. Officials have also indicated Jerusalem will seek to disconnect from the Strip in the longer term, and no longer supply it with resources and merchandise as it has done for many years, leaving the task to Egypt and international actors.

As they try to provide aid to the war-torn Strip, aid organizations have sought to make do with just the Rafah crossing with Egypt, but only on several days since that crossing opened has the number of trucks eclipsed the initially set goal of 100.

Roughly 1,500 trucks of aid have entered since Rafah reopened on October 21, averaging less than 45 trucks a day.

Before the war, which has displaced 1.5 million people, some 500 trucks of aid entered Gaza each day, primarily through Israel’s Kerem Shalom crossing.The two Biden administration officials cited several reasons for the underwhelming amount of aid that has been able to enter Gaza through Rafah, pointing first to a complicated inspection system, which has trucks first inspected in Egypt, then enter Israel’s Nitzana crossing where they are examined by Israeli authorities, before being returned to Egypt and ferried through Rafah.

This extra round of inspections was not in place before the war, but Israel has insisted on the additional step over the past month, citing fears that Hamas will try to smuggle in weapons and other supplies for military use.

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The US officials also pointed to problems with Egypt’s El-Arish Airport, which is the only one receiving shipments of aid that are then driven into Gaza through Rafah. The airport has only one runway and very limited parking, making it unsuitable for the mass deliveries that are needed for the coastal enclave.

The Biden administration has been quietly pushing Israel to reconsider its policy of keeping Kerem Shalom closed, proposing that the crossing could at the very least be used for inspections or for trucks to exit Gaza after delivering aid, thus easing the load on Rafah, one senior administration official said.

US humanitarian envoy David Satterfield acknowledged in a Tuesday interview that “the Israeli government has made very clear that it is not prepared to see that change.”

But Washington intends to continue raising the issue, the two administration officials said.

Israel’s stance has been “really problematic because the level of aid going into Gaza now is totally unsustainable” as the humanitarian situation worsens and more people are reliant on assistance, the senior administration official warned, while acknowledging that Israeli officials have insisted that they’ll be able to meet the truce’s 200-truck minimum requirement.

The official argued that the refusal to reopen Kerem Shalom is “completely political,” given that there are no current security concerns about allowing aid into Gaza through that crossing.

A second administration official asserted that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government was most exposed to public criticism when the premier first agreed to allow aid in through Rafah last month after vowing that it wouldn’t do so. But with Rafah now already operating, opening Kerem Shalom as well comes with far less political risk, the official posited.

“The [Israelis], rightfully so, have made a point to highlight the aid they’ve been allowing in, recognizing that it gives them more international legitimacy to continue the military operation,” said the second administration official. “But it can’t just be a talking point.”

WASHINGTON (JTA) — If the provisions of a [hostage deal approved early Wednesday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/cabinet-approves-deal-for-return-of-50-hostages-in-exchange-for-multi-day-ceasefire/) bear out and Hamas releases dozens of Israeli hostages amid a temporary halt in the fighting in Gaza, US officials will celebrate alongside the Israelis.

But then will come the questions about how, and whether, Israel restarts its war to defeat the Palestinian terror group responsible for the mass abductions.

Analysts and scholars with ties to Israel’s government say security officials are already anticipating those questions, as it appears that Hamas is set to release some 50 hostages — mostly women and children — this week. In exchange, Israel will release about three times as many imprisoned underage and female Palestinian terror convicts, and will pause its ground operation in Gaza for at least four days

Jonathan Schanzer, a vice president of the conservative-leaning Foundation for Defense of Democracies, who has been speaking to Israeli government officials, said he expects the initial pause to lead to demands for a longer break in the fighting.

“Once there’s calm there are going to be international efforts to extend the calm because as far as the international community goes, quiet is a good thing,”Israel has vowed to restart its campaign after the pause, but calls for a long-term ceasefire are already increasing internationally and among US Democrats in Congress. Recently, a rising number of Congress members and senators — including some Jewish lawmakers — have voiced calls for a ceasefire or criticized Israel’s conduct in Gaza. About 40 Democrats in total have [called](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-more-us-jewish-democrats-join-growing-calls-for-a-gaza-ceasefire/) for a ceasefire, although a number of their statements are qualified with demands that Hamas be dismantled and all the hostages be released — which are also Israel’s stated goals.

Watching how those Democrats respond during the anticipated pause in fighting will be key to understanding whether US support will further erode, said Kevin Rachlin, the vice president of public affairs for J Street, the liberal Jewish Israel lobby that is influential among Democrats.

He pointed to a letter signed this week by 13 Senate Democrats, calling on Biden to press Israel to come up with a detailed plan for “sustained humanitarian aid” for Gazan Palestinians.“The growing pressure that we’re seeing right now is not just [because of] the civilian death toll but also on the finite definition of what does success look like with this military operation?” Rachlin said. “I think with a pause, that allows more of these questions to come into the forefront. You’ll start to see more members talk and ask about that more forcefully.”

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Israel during the pause, the Israeli news site Walla reported late Tuesday. It will be his fourth trip to the country since the deadly Hamas onslaught on October 7.

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The Biden administration continues to back Israel’s war aims — although it too wants to know how Israel will conduct the war once the pause is over. In a call with reporters last week, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the administration had questions about how Israel would expand its military campaign in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, considering that Israel previously encouraged hundreds of thousands of civilians to move southward while it waged war with Hamas in the north.

“As they consider moving their operations to the south, we have said we don’t support those kinds of operations absent a cohesive plan by the Israelis to factor in how they’re going to be able to protect what is now mathematically a dramatically increased civilian population, because they were evacuated from the north at Israel’s urging,” he said.

Extending the pause into a ceasefire is not an option for Israel, which has vowed to eradicate Hamas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday evening as his cabinet met to vote on the terms of the hostage release.

“I am here to say the war will continue” after the release, Netanyahu said in a press conference before the vote. “We will not give up until we achieve absolute victory and we return them all.”

Schanzer said the demands of the Israeli public left no other choice for Netanyahu.

“The Israeli government is or was deemed to be in violation of its contract with the people of the south” on October 7, when Hamas terrorists breached Gaza’s border with southern Israel and killed 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and abducted over 240 people, Schanzer said.

To restore trust with its population, Schanzer said, “from the government’s perspective, the goal is to completely clean out Hamas from the Gaza Strip so that the southern communities can return and live normal peaceful lives. Every Israeli that I’ve talked to since the start of this war has said that there cannot be a return to [the status quo of] October 6.”

In response to a Jewish Telegraphic Agency question, a spokesman for the Biden administration’s National Security Council said its support for Israel’s war against Hamas would not wane, citing a statement from a Hamas spokesman vowing to repeat the October 7 atrocities.

“What we do not support are calls for Israel to stop defending itself from Hamas terrorists, which is what a permanent ceasefire would be,” the spokesman said, “Hamas has warned that what happened on October 7th ‘will happen again and again and again’ until Israel is annihilated. These comments are horrifying and are an important reminder of how much is at stake.”

Still, it was clear from the spokesman’s reply that the Biden administration still had questions about how Israel will conduct its war once it resumes. Biden officials are not happy with the frequency and extent of the humanitarian pauses Israel has recently agreed to.

“For a humanitarian pause to be fully successful, we have to have in place a system to maximize aid delivery and ensure the protection of humanitarian workers while also working to secure the release of hostages, and prevent the terrorists from using the pause to take advantage,” said the spokesman. “This is complex and we are continuing to work in earnest towards this goal.”

Kirby mentioned one measure of “fully successful” in his call with the media: the amount of humanitarian aid Israel allows into Gaza. “Our incremental goal was about [trucks of aid] 150 a day and we’re not close to achieving that,

Since Israel declared war after Hamas’s October 7 shock assault, the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry says that more than 14,000 people have been killed, including thousands of children. The figures cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include both civilians and Hamas members killed, including as a consequence of terror groups’ own rocket misfires.

David Makovsky, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which has close ties to the US and Israeli governments, said the pause would give Israel an opportunity to present to the Biden administration a detailed plan for its next steps.

“It’s a way for Israel to explain to the US what it looks like,” he said of the continuation of the war. “Now you have 2 million people all in the south, and you’re going to have to navigate that,” he said. “That’s where, I think, the US needs to be convinced.”

As of now, Biden stands as a bulwark against pressure for a ceasefire, Makovsky said, but that could change if the war becomes a quagmire with no clear way out.

“He’s going to be supportive but if he feels that Israel is stalled and that it’s not making progress on the objective, then I think there will probably be a reassessment,”RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Saudi Arabia on Wednesday roundly condemned an Israeli airstrike in the Jabaliya refugee camp on Tuesday in which the IDF said they killed the commander of Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion, Ibrahim Biari.

Israel said it had targeted a Hamas tunnel complex under the densely populated Jabaliya camp on Tuesday, killing Biari, who it believes was involved in the terror group’s October 7 attacks, as well as several other terrorists.

Palestinian reports have stated that dozens of people in the area were killed during the strike and AFP witnessed at least 47 bodies being recovered from the scene.

The IDF airstrike in Jabaliya was part of a “wide-scale strike” against Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Batallion. Israel [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-idf-soldiers-killed-in-gaza-as-troops-take-hamas-post-kill-commander-50-terrorists/) buildings collapsed due to Hamas tunnels running underneath the area, which had destabilized the ground. It said 50 terrorists, including one of the Hamas commanders responsible for the October 7 slaughter of Israelis, were killed in the incident, which also involved ground forces.

The strike was the latest development in Israel’s war against Hamas, which erupted on October 7 when some 2,500 Hamas terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,400 people and seizing over 230 hostages of all ages under the cover of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

In response, Israel vowed to eradicate the Gaza terror group and launched an offensive aimed at destroying Hamas’s military and governance capabilities.

Saudi Arabia denounced the strike “in the strongest terms possible,” decrying the “inhumane targeting” of the refugee camp “by the Israeli occupation forces.”

The attack, Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry said, had “caused the death and injury of a large number of innocent civilians.”

The statement from Riyadh was the latest sign the Israel-Hamas war has fractured efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Before Hamas launched the deadliest attack in Israel’s history on October 7, the United States had been close to brokering a deal that would have seen Saudi Arabia — home to Islam’s holiest sites — recognize Israel for the first time.

Supporters of the deal believe it could have transformed the Middle East, after decades in which Israel had very limited diplomatic, commercial and security ties with its neighbors.

In October, a source familiar with that process told AFP that Riyadh had decided to “pause discussion on possible normalization.”

Saudi Arabia had previously warned Israel against any further ground operations in the Gaza Strip, where Israel continues to press on with its goal of eliminating the ruling terror group.

The Hamas-run Gaza health ministry has stated that Israeli strikes have killed more than 8,500 people. However, the figures cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include both civilians and Hamas members killed in Gaza, including as a consequence of terror groups’ own rocket misfires.

Thirteen Israeli soldiers were killed Tuesday in fighting deep inside Gaza, including seven troops from the Givati Infantry Brigade’s Tzabar Battalion [killed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-9-soldiers-killed-battling-hamas-deep-inside-gaza-as-military-toll-mounts/) when a Namer armored personnel carrier they were in was hit by an anti-tank guided missile fired by Hamas.

Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu said Sunday that one of Israel’s options in the war against Hamas could be to drop a nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip, in comments that were quickly disavowed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also suspended the minister from cabinet meetings.

Eliyahu, a member of National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir’s far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, was speaking in an answer to a question in a radio interview.

“Your expectation is that tomorrow morning we’d drop what amounts to some kind a nuclear bomb on all of Gaza, flattening them, eliminating everybody there…,”

“That’s one way,” Eliyahu responded. “The second way is to work out what’s important to them, what scares them, what deters them… They’re not scared of death.”

Eliyahu does not have any connection to the three-member war cabinet directing the war against the Hamas terror group, nor is he part of the broader security cabinet.

When it was pointed out to the minister that there are some 240 hostages currently held in the Gaza Strip, Eliyahu doubled down.

“I pray and hope for their return, but there is a price to be paid in war,” he said. “Why are the lives of the abductees, whose release I really want, more important than the lives of the soldiers and the people who will be murdered later?”

Eliyahu also voiced objection to allowing any humanitarian aid into Gaza, saying, “we wouldn’t hand the Nazis humanitarian aid,” and charging that “there is no such thing as uninvolved civilians in Gaza.”

He also backed retaking the Strip and rebuilding the Israeli settlements that existed there before Israel withdrew from the area unilaterally in 2005, and when asked about the fate of the Palestinian population, he said: “They can go to Ireland or deserts; the monsters in Gaza should find a solution by themselves.”

Eliyahu also said the northern part of the Strip has no right to exist, adding that anyone waving a Palestinian or Hamas flag “shouldn’t continue to live on the face of the earth.

Netanyahu was quick to reject Eliyahu’s claim that dropping a nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip was a possibility.

“Amichai Eliyahu’s words are detached from reality,” Netanyahu said in a statement. “Israel and the IDF are acting in accordance with the highest standards of international law in order to prevent harm to uninvolved people, and we will continue to do that all the way to victory.”

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also condemned the “baseless and irresponsible” remarks in a post on X, adding he was glad “these are not the people in charge of Israel’s security.”

Opposition Leader Yair Lapid called on Netanyahu to fire Eliyahu, branding his comments “a horrifying and insane remark by an irresponsible minister.”

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“He offended the families of the captives [being held in Gaza], offended Israeli society and harmed our international standing,” Lapid said. “The presence of the extremists in the government endangers us and the success of the war goals — defeating Hamas and returning the hostages.

“Netanyahu must fire him this morning,”

National Unity leader Minister Benny Gantz, a member of the war cabinet, also attacked Eliyahu’s comments.

“Eliyahu’s unnecessary and irresponsible statement is detrimental to the path and values ​​of Israel, causes heavy political damage and, worst of all, adds to the pain of the families of those abducted from their homes,” he wrote on X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter.

MK Mansour Abbas, leader of the Arab Ra’am party, said that Eliyahu was echoing a sentiment expressed by other officials, and expressed concerns that his comments dehumanized Gazans.

“Eliyahu’s words about bombing Gaza with an atomic bomb were heard in different versions on the television screens from other people,” Abbas claimed on X.

“Dehumanization and collective punishment is the way to genocide and war crimes. There will be a day after the war — it is not the end of history and it is not Armageddon,” he wrote. “I am sure, and believe from the bottom of my heart, that there will still be peace and reconciliation between the two peoples.”

Amid the growing outrage, the Prime Minister’s Office announced that Eliyahu was suspended from cabinet meetings indefinitely. However, he still participated in at least one phone vote later in the day, according to Hebrew media.

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Government ministers told the Ynet news site that the suspension was meaningless.

“This is a joke, there barely are any cabinet meetings anyway, and most of the work is being done in rounds of votes by phone,” an unnamed minister was quoted as saying.

Netanyahu initially sought to fire Eliyahu, but backpedaled after Ben Gvir said he would not go along with the move, Channel 12 news reported.

A cabinet meeting scheduled for Sunday has been canceled, with no alternative date set.

Eliyahu later attempted to walk back his assertion, tweeting that “it is clear to all sensible people that the statement about the atom is metaphorical.”

“However, a strong and disproportionate response to terrorism is definitely required, which will clarify to the Nazis and their supporters that terrorism doesn’t pay,” he wrote.

“This is the only formula that democratic states can use to deal with terrorism. At the same time, it is clear that the State of Israel is committed to doing everything possible to return the hostages safe and sound,” Eliyahu wrote.

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The far-right minister has a history of incendiary and offensive comments.

Earlier this year he [called](https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-minister-calls-bank-of-israel-governor-a-savage-netanyahu-condemns/) Bank of Israel governor Amir Yaron a “savage” and said he was causing damage to the State of Israel and should be fired, after Yaron raised the alarm about government’s controversial judicial overhaul program.

In April he [accused](https://www.timesofisrael.com/minister-accuses-security-chiefs-of-acting-in-rebellion-against-current-government/) top security officials of “rebelling” against the coalition.

Eliyahu is the scion of a prominent national-religious family — the grandson of Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, a former chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel, and the son of Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu, the rabbi of the northern city of Safed and a leading far-right ideologue.

Eliyahu’s father has been known for controversial statements and rulings on Jewish law, including one that forbade the rental or sale of Jewish-owned property in Safed to Arabs. He has also criticized the Reform movement, the LGBTQ community, and women serving in IDF combat units.

Meanwhile, far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich asserted Saturday that Israel “will control Gaza after the war.”

“I will not invest a shekel in shielding the Gaza border area,” said Smotrich, implying that it will not be necessary after the conclusion of the war.

“The most important thing is that there will be no more Hamas, that the Strip will be under the operational control of the IDF for years, and that we will not return to the same misconceptions,” he told Channel 12. “We will be there, we will rule there and we will maintain security.”

Israel launched its war against Hamas after the terror group carried out a brutal assault on southern Israel communities, killing some 1,400 people, mostly civilians, and taking over 240 hostages, including small children and the elderly.

In response to the killings, Israel vowed to eradicate the terror group and has since hit thousands of Hamas targets inside the Strip with airstrikes and an ongoing ground operation, saying that it is working to minimize civilian casualties in Gaza.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said Saturday that more than 9,400 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked war with its murderous assault. Hamas figures cannot be independently confirmed, and the terror group has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll. The figures do not differentiate between terror operatives and civilians nor between those killed in Israeli strikes and those killed by the hundreds of rockets fired by terror groups that have fallen short inside the Strip.

An estimated 800,000 Palestinians have fled to the south from Gaza City and other northern areas following repeated Israeli calls to evacuate, but hundreds of thousands remain in the north, including many who left and later returned. Israel is also carrying out some airstrikes in the south.

South Africa will Tuesday host a virtual summit of the BRICS group of nations, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, to discuss the war between Israel and the Hamas terror group, Pretoria and Moscow said Monday.

The BRICS —  Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — are a group of major emerging economies seeking to reshape the US and Western-led global order.

Tuesday’s “Extraordinary Joint Meeting on the Middle East Situation in Gaza” will be hosted by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa in the hope of drawing up a common response to the more than six-week conflict.

Leaders from Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates — who are all due to join the BRICS group in January 2024 — will attend the meeting.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will also participate, the South African presidency said in a statement

It added that all five BRICS heads of state will join the virtual summit, after which a joint statement with particular reference to Gaza is expected.

War erupted after Hamas’s October 7 massacre, which saw some 3,000 terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,200 people and seizing over 240 hostages of all ages.

In Gaza, officials say around 13,300 people, more than 5,500 of them children, have been killed in Israel’s retaliatory air and ground offensive, which aims to destroy the terror group’s infrastructure. The figures are issued by the Hamas-run health ministry and cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include both civilians and Hamas members killed in Gaza, including as a consequence of terror groups’ own rocket misfires.

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South Africa has long been a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause, with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party often linking it to its own struggle against apartheid.

The ANC [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/south-africas-ruling-party-calls-for-suspension-of-israel-ties/) last Thursday that it would support a parliamentary motion to suspend diplomatic relations with Israel until it agrees to a ceasefire in Gaza, decrying the “genocidal actions of the Israeli regime.”

On Friday, South Africa joined four other nations in calling for an International Criminal Court investigation into the Israel-Hamas war.

China has historically been sympathetic to the Palestinians and supportive of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Beijing has been calling for an immediate ceasefire since the start of the war last month.

India, which has tried to balance its current close ties with Israel and its traditional support for the Palestinians, may be a moderating voice.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused the West of stoking tensions in the Middle East, and criticized Israel for its conduct in the conflict.

Putin skipped the last BRICS annual summit in Johannesburg, as he is the target of an International Criminal Court arrest warrant — a provision that South Africa as an ICC member would be expected to implement if he were to set foot in the country.

“advanced terror activity with funding of tens of thousands of shekels, and helped wanted persons and terrorist operatives.”“took a significant part in escalating the security situation in the region,” and that his son was a local terror operative.“central inciter of violence in Judea and Samaria, calling for terror attacks against soldiers and Israel while taking advantage of his public standing,” the statement said, using the biblical terms for the West Bank.

“Given his status in Judea and Samaria and overseas, his actions constituted a high threat that warranted his immediate arrest, the statement said.

Fatah is the ruling party of the Palestinian Authority and has largely cooperated with Israel in trying to combat West Bank terror in recent years.

Later, Israeli troops again entered Jenin to “foil terror infrastructure,” the IDF said.

The troops found and destroyed explosive devices planted in the roads and an underground tunnel used by gunmen. A car with ammunition and military equipment was also captured and confiscated.

The strike affected businesses, banks and universities, and was called to denounce the Israeli “aggression” in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and accompanied by calls to “escalate the confrontation with the occupation.”The majority of the hostages are civilians, some of them infants, young children and elderly people. Only a handful have been released, rescued by Israeli troops or were recovered dead.

“We are close to reaching a deal on a truce,” Haniyeh said, according to a statement sent by his office to AFP.

In a similar statement posted to Telegram, the Doha-based Haniyeh said Hamas had given its response to Qatar and other mediators, without elaborating.Hamas gunmen killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, during cross-border raids from the Gaza Strip on October 7 — the deadliest attack in Israel’s history.

In response, Israel launched a military campaign to topple Hamas from ruling Gaza and to release the hostages. The intense air, sea, and ground campaign is targeting terror infrastructure which Israel says is embedded among the civilian population. Aid groups have warned of what they say is a growing humanitarian crisis with hundreds of thousands of people displaced and a shortage of basic supplie

They said the tentative deal includes a five-day truce, comprising a ceasefire on the ground and limits to Israeli air operations over southern Gaza.

Under the agreement, between 50 and 100 Israeli civilian and foreign hostages would be released, but no military personnel.

In exchange, some 300 Palestinians would be released from Israeli jails, among them women and children.

According to the Hamas and PIJ sources, the deal would also allow for up to 300 trucks of food and medical aid to enter Gaza.

Hamas Gaza chief Yahya Sinwar is also insisting on the halt to all air operations, the Walla outlet reported.

Channel 12 has previously reported that Hamas sought an Israeli commitment not to use its observation drones during the five-day lull to keep tabs on what Hamas is up to, and where it is moving the hostages from

While there was no official Israeli confirmation, Channel 12 cited a senior Israeli official Tuesday as saying “we are very close to a deal.”

Noting that there are still technical issues to resolve, the official said there is an agreement that at least 50 people will be freed, while dozens more could be released in exchange for extending a ceasefire beyond the initial few days.

Those set to be released are expected to be children, their mothers and other women, Channel 12 said.

Army Radio reported that the IDF Home Front Command’s operation division is believed to be preparing for an exchange plan.

The station cited security officials as saying that the IDF would remain in the Gaza Strip and that troops would not be pulled back into Israeli territory during the ceasefire.

A key humanitarian corridor along the Salah a-Din road leading from northern to southern Gaza would remain open to enable residents of the north to evacuate to the south.

However, the IDF will not permit residents who already evacuated to return to their neighborhoods during the ceasefire. The army is working on preparing capabilities to make sure that Hamas does not violate the ceasefire, including by using an extensive tunnel network the terror group dug under Gaza to deploy fighters. Any threat to Israeli forces that is identified will immediately be attacked, the report said, even during the ceasefire.

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Education Minister Yoav Kisch told Army Radio, “We must not support a deal that would make us stop the war effort. Hamas will try to give us as few hostages as possible and create a reality in which we cannot continue to pressure it.”

Hopes had been growing for talks brokered by Qatar, where Hamas has a political office and which has behind-the-scenes diplomatic links with Israel.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said Monday that its president had traveled to Qatar to meet Hamas’s Haniyeh. The ICRC said it calls for the release of hostages but is not part of any negotiations.

### ‘We will not stop fighting’

An agreement could bring some respite for Gazans who have lived for more than six weeks with Israel’s airstrikes and an expanding ground offensive.

Large parts of Gaza have been destroyed by airstrikes that have numbered in the thousands, and the territory is under blockade, with tight controls over food, water and fuel allowed to enter. Israel has said there is no shortage of essential supplies and accuses Hamas of plundering resources for its military apparatus — fuel, in particular — rather than distributing them to the civilian population. Israeli officials say Hamas needs the fuel to run the ventilation and electricity in its vast tunnel network.

Israel has vowed to press ahead with its offensive, pledging to crush Hamas and ensure the hostages are released.

“We will not stop fighting until we bring our hostages home,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared Monday after [meeting relatives of those abducted](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-meets-with-families-of-hostages-held-in-gaza-as-reports-swirl-of-imminent-deal/) along with the two other ministers in his war cabinet.

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Udi Goren, whose cousin is Gaza hostage Tal Haimi, told reporters after coming out of the meeting that the war cabinet did not share any details about any possible deal to release the hostages.

Netanyahu’s office has repeatedly [cautioned](https://www.timesofisrael.com/no-deal-yet-pm-shoots-down-incorrect-reports-of-imminent-hostage-agreement/) against various media reports regarding the hostage negotiations, adding that it would formally notify the public in the event that a deal is actually reached.

On Monday, US President Joe Biden was asked during the annual turkey pardoning ceremony on the White House lawn in the run up to Thursday’s US Thanksgiving holiday, whether a hostage deal was close to being reached, to which he responded: “I believe so… yes.”

He added that he could not speak publicly about it any further and then raised his hand up to show that his fingers were crossed in the hope that a deal would take place soon.

On Sunday, Channel 12 reported that while Israel was demanding the release of all hostage children and their mothers — about 53 people — Hamas is claiming it does not know the location of them all, as the hostages are being held by various factions and cells, and needs the pause in fighting to determine where they all are.

So far efforts by Qatar have led to the release of four of the hostages. A fifth hostage, a soldier, was rescued in an Israeli operation. Israel has also found the bodies of two hostages near the Shifa hospital in Gaza.

The families of hostages have been organizing protests, rallies, and marches to press the government on securing their loved ones’ release. On Saturday, families of hostages and thousands of their supporters demonstrated in Tel Aviv’s Hostages Square in a rally focused in particular on the some 40 children believed held in Gaza.

According to Gaza’s Hamas-run health authorities, more than 13,000 Palestinians have been killed, two-thirds of them women and minors. Those figures cannot be independently verified, and Hamas has been accused of inflating them and of designating gunmen in their late teens as children. It is not known how many among its total are combatants, and how many among the dead were victims of misfired rockets aimed at Israel

We’re actively helping the Israelis to do a number of things,Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas and free the hostages, while diplomats from Qatar and other countries have attempted to negotiate their release.

Maier, who is the Pentagon’s senior special operations policy official, told the conference a key objective for the US personnel is to “identify hostages, including American hostages.”

“It’s really our responsibility to do so,”

Maier said the US commandos have not been given any combat roles but were discussing with Israeli forces the situation in Gaza for “what is going to be a very complex fight going forward.”

Though Maier would not reveal how many special operations forces are in Israel the NY Times cited other unnamed US officials as saying several dozen have been sent in the past few days. There was already a small team in Israel on October 7 for previously arranged training.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the newspaper that the commandos were joining FBI, State Department and other US hostage-recovery specialists who are working with Israeli counterparts.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin is known to be holding near daily discussions with Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in which he has reportedly stressed that any ground incursion into Gaza must be carefully handled due to the complexity of fighting in a tightly populated urban area, further complicated by the networks of tunnels Hamas has dug under the Strip to hide and moves its forces.

“We will work with them as much as possible to help advise them on those types of activities,” Maier said.

Vice President Kamala Harris said in an interview aired Sunday that Washington would not send troops to Israel or Gaza, amid domestic worries that the US could get entangled in another costly conflict in the Middle East.

“to help our own citizens get out of places and to help our embassies be secure.”he Hamas-run health ministry has claimed more than 8,500 people have been killed in the enclave, a figure that cannot be independently verified. Hamas has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll, and it also does not distinguish between civilians and terror operatives. The terror group has pushed back against such claims, releasing an unverified list of names it says represent those killed. Some of the dead are believed to be victims of Palestinian terrorists’ own misfired rockets.

Israel says its offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas’s infrastructure, and has vowed to eliminate the entire terror group, which rules the Strip. It says it is targeting all areas where Hamas operates, while seeking to minimize civilian casualties and urging the civilian population to evacuate to southern Gaza. Troops are already operating on the ground in Gaza

The “voluntary” resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza is slowly becoming a key official policy of the government, with a senior official saying that Israel has held talks with several countries for their potential absorption.

Zman Israel, The Times of Israel’s Hebrew sister site, has learned that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition is conducting secret contacts for accepting thousands of immigrants from Gaza with Congo, in addition to other nations.

“Congo will be willing to take in migrants, and we’re in talks with others,”

Congo has high levels of inequality, and 52.5 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, [according](https://www.wfp.org/countries/congo) to the World Food Programme.

Meanwhile, Gaza is facing a growing humanitarian crisis amid the Israel-Hamas war, which was sparked on October 7 when thousands of terrorists stormed the border and rampaged through southern Israeli communities, massacring some 1,200 and kidnapping approximately 240 more as hostages in the Strip.

Our problem is [finding] countries that are willing to absorb Gazans, and we are working on it,” he said.

The prime minister was responding to Likud MK Danny Danon, who claimed that “the world is already discussing the possibilities of voluntary immigration,” though the idea has been roundly rejected by the international community

The far-right Religious Zionism and Otzma Yehudit parties, headed by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, respectively, have [backed the plans for migration](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ministers-call-for-resettling-gazas-palestinians-building-settlements-in-strip/).

On Tuesday, the US State Department called out Smotrich and Ben Gvir for advocating the resettlement of Palestinians outside of Gaza, [slamming](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-slams-irresponsible-calls-by-smotrich-and-ben-gvir-for-emigration-of-gazans/) their rhetoric as “inflammatory and irresponsible.” Smotrich dismissed the comments on Wednesday, claiming that over 70 percent of Israelis support the idea of “encouraging voluntary immigration” because “two million people [in Gaza] wake up every morning with the desire to destroy the State of Israel.”

Netanyahu’s office has issued statements in the past publicly insisting that Smotrich and Ben Gvir do not represent government policy on the matter, despite his own comments last week in support of a population transfer.“voluntary migration is the best and most realistic program for the day after the fighting ends.”

On Tuesday, during a conference held in the Knesset to examine possibilities for postwar Gaza, Gamliel said: “At the end of the war, Hamas rule will collapse. There are no municipal authorities; the civilian population will be entirely dependent on humanitarian aid. There will be no work, and 60% of Gaza’s agricultural land will become security buffer zones.”

In internal discussions, Gamliel presented a map of the Gaza Strip after the fighting that shows remaining residents boxed in. Israel would cut ties with Gaza and expand its security buffer zones; control the Philadelphi Corridor, which runs along the 14-kilometer (8.7-mile) Gaza-Egypt border (a plan [attacked](https://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-lawmaker-pans-netanyahus-postwar-gaza-ideas-as-violation-of-peace-treaty/) by an Egyptian lawmaker on Saturday after it was announced by Netanyahu); and establish a permanent naval blockade

Gamliel said that Gaza must not be handed over to the Palestinian Authority, and Gazans must not be left in the Strip to be educated to hate, as that would mean that further attacks on Israel are only a matter of time. While rejecting the PA’s return, the government has offered few details on what political entity it wants to rule Gaza.

“The Gaza problem is not just our problem,” Gamliel said. “The world should support humanitarian emigration, because that’s the only solution I know.”

Likud’s Danon is another of the leading supporters of the plan to encourage Gazans to leave the Strip.

On Tuesday, he presented his five-step plan at a conference in the Knesset (demobilization, establishing a security buffer zone, Israeli presence at the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, voluntary emigration, and eradicating the terrorist atmosphere).

In November, he [published](https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-israeli-lawmakers-call-on-european-countries-to-take-in-gaza-refugees/) an op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal along with Yesh Atid MK Ram Ben Barak in which the two detailed the plan for Palestinian migration for the first time, calling for “countries around the world to accept limited numbers of Gazan families who have expressed a desire to relocate.” Ben Barak later seemed to walk back the piece, [claiming](https://www.timesofisrael.com/centrist-mk-says-call-on-european-countries-to-take-gaza-refugees-was-misunderstood/) he had “not been completely understood.”

The security cabinet was supposed to meet Tuesday evening to discuss what will happen in Gaza at the end of the war.

Ministers intended to present their plans and in talks between some of them, the idea was also raised to ask Saudi Arabia to take in hundreds of thousands of Palestinians for work. The Gulf kingdom is in the midst of a tremendous construction boom and employs close to half a million workers, who currently come mainly from India, Bangladesh and other countries.

However, the security cabinet discussion was postponed until Wednesday due to the need for security consultations after Hamas’s deputy political leader, Saleh al-Arouri — wanted for years by Israel and seen as the group’s prime orchestrator of West Bank terrorism — was [killed in an alleged Israeli strike](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-deputy-leader-saleh-al-arouri-killed-in-alleged-israeli-strike-in-beirut-suburb/) in the Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh.

The idea of resettling Gazans was expected to take center stage during Wednesday’s security cabinet meeting.

The discussion comes amid growing frustration in Washington with Netanyahu’s government, which the Biden administration has continued to support diplomatically and militarily in the war against Hamas but has increasingly sparred with regarding planning for Gaza once the fighting ends.

The Israel Defense Forces revealed new intelligence Sunday it said provided further evidence that the Hamas terror group is using medical facilities in the Gaza Strip for terror purposes.

IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari briefed international media outlets with video footage of Hamas gunmen emerging from a tunnel under Sheikh Hamad Hospital, as well firing at Israelis forces from within the building itself.

War erupted between Israel and Hamas last month when the Palestinian terror group launched a massive attack that killed over 1,400 people. Israel has repeatedly said Hamas is using civilians as human shields, including by locating operations bases under hospitals. Captured Hamas terrorists have [confirmed the claims](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-interrogation-video-hamas-terrorists-confirm-groups-hideout-under-gaza-hospital/), explaining that Hamas knows Israel will not bomb a medical center.

Today, I will be sharing evidence proving that Hamas systematically exploits hospitals as part of its war machine,” Hagari said. “We decided to declassify and share more sensitive intelligence with you, because the world must take immediate action.”

Hagari presented a video showing an underground entrance from Sheikh Hamad Hospital, which he said connects to Hamas tunnel networks believed to run for hundreds of kilometers under the Palestinian enclav

“If it weren’t enough that we exposed a tunnel under the hospital, the terrorists also shot at our soldiers from within the hospital,” He noted that construction of the hospital, located north of Gaza City, was funded by the Qatari government.

Hagari reported that the IDF has intelligence of a tunnel network under the so-called Indonesian Hospital, as well as aerial imagery showing rocket launchers a few dozen meters from the complex.

“Hamas systematically built the Indonesian Hospital to disguise its underground terror infrastructure,”

“Human shields are a key pillar of Hamas’s terror operations. Hamas systematically exploits hospitals as a key part of its war machine. This is the murderous organization we are dealing with. Hamas doesn’t even try to hide it. They say it loud and clear.”The IDF has previously accused Hamas of having its main base of operations [under Shifa Hospital](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamass-main-operations-base-is-under-shifa-hospital-in-gaza-city-says-idf/), the largest medical center in Gaza, as well as hoarding fuel for terror purposes.

“Hamas moves fuel from the [Shifa] hospital to terrorists in Jabaliya,” Hagari said referring to a city north of Gaza City. “They steal the fuel from the hospital to fuel terror infrastructure

Separately, Hagari said the IDF has carried out intense efforts to warn Palestinians to evacuate from northern Gaza to its south.

He said the Israeli Air Force dropped more than one and a half million fliers in northern Gaza, and made over 20,000 phone calls to key people in those areas, in order to get the civilian population to evacuate.

“Our war is with Hamas, not the civilians in Gaza. We will not accept Hamas’s cynical use of hospitals, to hide their terror infrastructure. Hamas’s exploitation of hospitals must come to an end,” Hagari said.

He added that Hamas is trying to prevent the IDF from opening evacuation routes that northern Strip residents can use to reach safety in the south.

“The IDF adjusted our ground operations to keep the corridors from the north to the south open, but Hamas is attacking our forces, like yesterday, that opened this corridor! This is why we had to stop the corridor yesterday. Hamas tries to prevent Gazans from moving south.”

Israel does conduct strikes in the Strip’s south as well, and civilians have reportedly been killed there along with Hamas operatives, but its activity in those areas is far more limited.

Separately, the IDF on Sunday shared footage of its troops locating [rocket-launching positions in civilian areas](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-troops-found-hamas-rocket-launchers-near-playground-swimming-pool-in-gaza/), amid efforts to uncover and destroy Hamas infrastructure. The terror group uses such sites to fire rockets at Israeli population centers.

Troops found four underground launchers some five meters (16 feet) from a children’s swimming pool, and around 30 meters from residential homes in the northern Gaza Strip, footage showed. Another clip showed troops locating a number of rocket launchers within a children’s playground and amusement park compound.

“This is further proof of the Hamas terror organization’s constant use of the civilian population as a human shield for terror purposes,” the IDF said in a statement.

The military has for weeks been urging northern Gaza residents to evacuate southward, warning them it will be focusing its military efforts on the Gaza City area, the heart of Hamas’s rule and its main base of operations in Gaza. At least 800,000 of some one million residents of the area have done so.

On Saturday morning, the IDF’s Arabic-language spokesman Lt. Col. Avichay Adraee announced that between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. the Strip’s north-to-south Salah a-Din road would be open for Palestinians to evacuate to southern Gaza.

The IDF said Hamas took advantage of the situation and launched mortars and anti-tank guided missiles at troops working to open up the road for civilians. No soldiers were injured.

US President Joe Biden has [also said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-says-hamas-using-innocent-gazans-as-human-shields-calls-netanyahu-pas-abbas/) that Hamas is using civilians as human shields.

Israel declared war with the aim of eradicating Hamas following the terror group’s devastating October 7 onslaught, in which thousands of terrorists stormed through the border and murdered some 1,400 people, mostly civilians killed in their homes and at a music festival, and abducted over 240 of all ages who are being held captive in Gaza. The Hamas assault came under a barrage of thousands of rockets fired across Israel. Hamas and other terror groups have continued to rain rockets on Israel, displacing over 200,000 Israelis.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said Sunday that more than 9,770 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked war with its murderous assault. Hamas figures cannot be independently confirmed, and the terror group has been accused of artificially inflating the death toll. The figures do not differentiate between terror operatives and civilians nor between those killed in Israeli strikes and those killed by the hundreds of rockets fired by terror groups that have fallen short inside the Strip.

To create some wiggle room in talks about recognizing Israel and to get the US pact back on track, Saudi officials have told their US counterparts that Riyadh would not insist Israel take concrete steps to create a Palestinian state and would instead accept a political commitment to a two-state solution, two senior regional sources said.Last month, two senior US officials and a senior Arab diplomat [told](https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-normalization-still-possible-post-war-but-price-for-israel-is-higher-officials/) The Times of Israel that while the broader interests of the countries involved have not changed since the October 7 attack, the price of the “significant Palestinian component” of the deal had in fact gone up.

Whereas Israel was being asked before the war to take limited steps to keep a two-state solution alive, the senior officials said it will now need to commit to establishing an irreversible pathway toward an eventual Palestinian state while also accepting the return of the Palestinian Authority to governing the Gaza Strip, which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has all but [rejected](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-said-to-reject-us-plan-for-saudi-normalization-in-return-for-path-to-palestinian-statehood/) in recent months.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Netanyahu during a visit to Tel Aviv last month that Arab stakeholders are willing to take part in the reconstruction of Gaza and that Saudi Arabia is willing to normalize relations with Israel if Jerusalem agrees to take steps to create a political horizon for the Palestinians, an Israeli official said, adding that Netanyahu did not appear open to the proposal.

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The premier said publicly afterward that he had rejected the American “attempt to impose on us a reality that will jeopardize us,” adding that he “will not compromise on full Israeli security control over all the territory west of the Jordan [River].”

While this does not leave room for a fully sovereign Palestinian state, PA President Mahmoud Abbas and successive US administrations have said the Palestinian state they seek to establish would be demilitarized.

For his part, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-arabias-top-envoy-no-recognizing-israel-without-path-to-palestinian-state/) last month that Riyadh will not normalize relations with Israel nor contribute to Gaza’s reconstruction without a credible pathway to a Palestinian state

Blinken is slated to arrive back in Israel on Sunday where he is again expected to raise the Saudi normalization talks with Netanyahu.

His trip comes days after reports that the US is considering unilaterally recognizing an independent Palestinian state and after UK Foreign Minister David Cameron announced that London was considering doing the same.

Earlier this week, Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer met with senior administration officials in Washington and relayed that Netanyahu is prepared to commit to a political horizon for the Palestinians but will not accept talk of a demilitarized Palestinian state, Channel 12 reported Friday, without citing any sources.Explaining Saudi Arabia’s approach to the Palestinian component of the negotiations, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington senior scholar Hussein Ibish said that before October 7, “it would have been good enough for Saudi Arabia for Israel to get involved in some sort of national negotiations with the PLO for the Palestinians, and the propping up of the PA, but without necessarily undertaking to the eventual recognition of a Palestinian state, and accepting the irrevocable principle of Palestinian statehood.”

Since the war’s breakout, though, demands regarding the Palestinian component of the deal have gone up. “Nobody is seriously expecting Israel to withdraw unilaterally from the West Bank or to recognize a Palestinian state that does not yet exist. What is required is for Israel to recognize the Palestinian right to a state and the need for a Palestinian state,” Ibish maintained.

The warning was one of several issued by the top US diplomat during his meeting with the war cabinet and in separate sit-downs with top officials. At a press conference, he also publicly cautioned Israel at considerable length against allowing the same scale of death and displacement in southern Gaza once fighting shifts there from northern Gaza.

During Thursday’s war cabinet meeting, ministers reportedly pushed back on some of Blinken’s concerns regarding how Israel has prosecuted the campaign, saying that the IDF follows the laws of war and has taken steps to avoid civilian casualties.

At one point in the meeting, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant noted that the Israeli public is united behind the goal of dismantling Hamas, even if it takes months, the Israeli official said.

Blinken responded that he wasn’t sure if Israel would have the international backing to continue fighting for so long at the same intensity that was seen before the war was temporarily paused in a truce deal last Friday, according to the official.

Blinken’s reported and public comments reflected growing unease in the US with the way Israel has carried out the war, which has resulted in scenes of widespread devastation in parts of the enclave and fears of a massive humanitarian catastrophe, with large numbers of Gazans left homeless, hungry and exposed to disease.

During his press conference Thursday night recapping his meetings in Israel, the secretary said he told Israel’s leaders that they would need to change the way they are fighting.

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“I underscored the imperative — for 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,”

“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,” he said. “That means taking more effective steps to protect the lives of civilians, including by clearly and precisely designating areas and places in southern and central Gaza where they can be safe and out of the line of fire.”

He also said Israel must avoid further mass displacement of Palestinians; avoid the targeting of “life-critical infrastructure like hospitals, like power stations, like water facilities”; and allow the eventual return of displaced Palestinians to northern Gaza. “There must be no enduring internal displacement,” he said.

Each of these points had been made by US officials speaking on condition of anonymity in recent weeks, but it appeared to be the first time they were stated on-the-record in the latest demonstration of the administration kicking up its pressure on Israel.

Faced with the knotty problem of defeating Hamas from the crowded Palestinian enclave where it is heavily entrenched, Israeli military planners have split the Strip in two, sending civilians south while concentrating its campaign in the north, with apparent plans to later move civilians north and repeat the process in southern Gaza.

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Senior Israeli military officers say the IDF’s tactics in northern Gaza involved encouraging noncombatants for weeks to evacuate, and then bombarding targeted areas heavily from the air, before ground forces moved through building by building. This left immense devastation, they acknowledge, but was necessary to address concerns that almost every building was booby-trapped and contained shafts leading to underground tunnels from which Hamas gunmen were emerging or poised to emerge.

The IDF has been considering more surgical use of ground forces in parts of southern Gaza, but also believes utilizing the northern Gaza approach when tackling Hamas strongholds in the south could be crucial in avoiding large-scale IDF casualties.

“The way Israel defends itself matters,” Blinken said at his press conference. Israel must act in accordance with “humanitarian law and the laws of war, even when confronting a terrorist group that respects neither.”

All of this can be done while enabling Israel to achieve its objectives, he asserted, though he acknowledged that the challenge is complicated because “Hamas intentionally embeds within civilians — within and below hospitals, schools, apartment buildings, refugee camps.”

Still, he argued, Israel’s sophisticated military “is capable of neutralizing the threat posed by Hamas, while minimizing harm to innocent men, women and children. And it has an obligation to do so.”

Blinken added that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the rest of the war cabinet agreed with the approach pushed by the US to avoid civilian casualties.

“Hamas could lay down its arms, surrender the leaders who are responsible for the slaughter, the torture, the rapes of October 7. Hamas could renounce its stated goal of eliminating Israel, killing Jews and repeating the atrocities of October 7, again and again and again.”veryone around the world who cares about protecting innocent lives, said Blinken, should be “demanding of Hamas that it immediately stop its murderous acts of terror and deplorable use of innocent men, women and children as human shields.”

### Doesn’t want ceasefire; does want truce extended

The trip to Israel was Blinken’s fourth since October 7, when war broke out following a Hamas attack in which 3,000 terrorists infiltrated southern Israeli communities, massacring 1,200 people — mostly civilians slaughtered in their homes and at a music festival — and taking some 240 hostages.

Aside from the war cabinet summit, Blinken also held separate meetings with Netanyahu, President Isaac Herzog, Gallant, war cabinet Minister Benny Gantz and Opposition Leader Yair Lapid.

The meetings came on the last day of a twice-extended week-long truce championed by Blinken to allow for the release of hostages and for humanitarian aid to get to more parts of the beleaguered enclave.

While the US does not back a permanent ceasefire, it has urged the breather to continue — to get more hostages out and more aid in.

Biden has come under significant pressure from the far-left flank of the Democratic Party and US allies in the Mideast and beyond to take a harder stance on Israel due to the high death toll in Gaza. The Hamas-run health ministry says over 15,000 have died, though those numbers cannot be verified, do not differentiate between civilians and combatants, and include Palestinians killed by errant rocket fire from within Gaza.

We continue to believe that Israel has a right and responsibility to go after Hamas. They have said very clearly that when these pauses are over, they intend to go back at it. As they make that decision, they’ll continue to find support from the United States in terms of the tools and capabilities, the weapons systems that they need as well as the advice and the perspectives that we can offer in terms of urban warfare,” White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said during a separate briefing on Thursday.

Kirby clarified that the US supports additional extensions to the ongoing humanitarian pause, with negotiations ongoing through Thursday for another extension. Like Blinken, he highlighted that the pause allows for the exit of hostages from the Strip and the entry of more aid into the enclave.

However, Kirby said the US does not back a permanent ceasefire, which Washington and Israel say would allow the threat posed by Hamas to remain.

In addition to sharpening his rhetoric regarding the need to protect civilians in Gaza, Blinken said he also discussed the need to plan for who will govern Gaza after the war.

The US is pushing for a “revitalized” Palestinian Authority to eventually govern a reunited Gaza and West Bank, though Netanyahu has all but rejected this proposal.

Blinken said Ramallah would have to undergo reforms, rid itself of corruption and promote a free press to be “revitalized.”

### The day after

During the war cabinet meeting, Blinken reportedly confronted Netanyahu to propose alternatives to PA rule rather than just dismissing what much of the international community believes is the only realistic option for a post-war Gaza.

The best way to kill an idea is to bring a better idea. The other countries in the region need to know what you are planning,” Blinken told Netanyahu in comments leaked to Channel 12.

There was a moment of silence in the room before Netanyahu responded, “As long as I’m sitting in this chair, the Palestinian Authority, which supports, educates and finances terror, will not rule Gaza the day after Hamas [is toppled].”

During his meeting with Netanyahu, Blinken again raised the need for Israel to take “immediate steps to hold settler extremists accountable for violence against Palestinians in the West Bank,” according to the US readout. Earlier this month, Biden threatened to issue visa bans against violent settlers whose attacks, rights groups say, have led roughly 1,000 Palestinians to flee their lands.

Blinken told reporters he raised Washington’s “deep concerns” about the uptick in extremist settler violence in addition to proposals from several hardline ministers to further expand settlements in the West Bank.

“I made clear our expectations about addressing these issues,” he said.

He called for steps towards “improving the lives of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank in immediate, tangible ways,” adding that they should be provided with a credible path toward statehood.

This is the same Hamas that carried out the terrible massacre on Oct. 7, the same Hamas that tries to murder us everywhere. I told him: We swore, and I swore, to eliminate Hamas. Nothing will stop us,” the statement read.

“We will continue this war until we achieve the three goals — to release all our hostages, to eliminate Hamas completely, and to ensure that Gaza will never again face such a threat,”

“would continue to insist on full accountability for those responsible” for violence against Palestinians, which has increased significantly since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, according to a State Department readout.

The pair discussed the “urgent need for measures to improve the security and freedom of Palestinians in the West Bank” during a meeting in Ramallah

Blinken also raised US efforts to accelerate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza.

According to the PA’s official Wafa news agency, Abbas emphasized the need to reach a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, spare civilians from bombardments and increase the flow of humanitarian aid into the Strip.

comprehensive file documenting Israeli occupation crimes in Gaza, and the West Bank, including Jerusalem,”This is what we can do that nobody else can do and this is us using all of our abilities,” he said. “We’ve geared the whole country toward this. If it doesn’t work, all hell will break loose.”

Israel says 240 people — Israelis, dual nationals and foreigners — were abducted by Hamas terrorists when they launched the deadliest attacks in Israel’s 75-year history on October 7, killing at least 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

An Israeli government official briefing reporters on Tuesday said the deal was expected to see the release of 50 living Israeli citizens — children, mothers and other women — in groups of 12-13 people over four days. In exchange, Israel has agreed to a truce for those four days, for the first time since the outbreak of the war, as well as the release of 150 teenage and female Palestinian security prisoners. The halt in fighting could be extended by one additional day for each additional group of 10 hostages freed, after which Israel’s campaign to destroy Hamas in Gaza is to resume.

Mossad chief David Barnea was in Doha on Wednesday to meet with Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani to discuss final details of the hostage deal slated to go into place Thursday morning. Al Thani is also the Qatari foreign minister.

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The West is increasingly using the influence of the small but gas-rich Gulf Arab state ruled by Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani in these situations, with the role of Qatar also crucial to the release in September of [five Americans](https://www.timesofisrael.com/five-us-prisoners-freed-from-iran-after-long-ordeal-in-exchange-for-frozen-funds/) held by Iran.

While Egypt has traditionally in recent years served as the main mediator between Israel and Palestinian groups, and Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also made no secret of its desire to be involved, the focus was on Qatar helping to return hostages safely.

### Pitfalls

Behind the scenes, Qatar was triangulating between Israel and Hamas and Qatari ambassadors had met with the families of hostages around the world, Ansari said.

“They know that there are children, there are women, there are families that are suffering every day, from the lack of information from the fact that they don’t know what is happening with their family members right now. So it’s a renewed sense of duty on us,”

Qatar has an advantage that the other candidates for negotiation do not have: It has housed the political leadership of Hamas” for the last decade, said Hasni Abidi, director of the Geneva-based Center for Studies and Research on the Arab World and the Mediterraneanconflict between Israel and Hamas, in Amman, Jordan, November 4, 2023. (Jonathan Ernst/ Pool Photo via AP)

The emirate of Qatar has further boosted its status as a specialist power in resolving delicate hostage situations by using its influence to help secure the release some of the hostages kidnapped by Palestinian terror group Hamas during its October 7 devastating assault on Israel.

Analysts say Qatar has honed a careful balancing act, allowing it to maintain warm relations with Western powers, while keeping ties with radical groups and states regarded as pariahs even by close allies.

Qatar’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Majed Al-Ansari told AFP that the breakthrough deal on Wednesday morning that will see a pause in hostilities underlined the country’s singular diplomatic position.

Tel Aviv Cafe brews resilience

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“This is what we can do that nobody else can do and this is us using all of our abilities,” he said. “We’ve geared the whole country toward this. If it doesn’t work, all hell will break loose.”

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In retaliation, Israel launched a military campaign including a ground offensive in the Gaza Strip, aimed at toppling Hamas, which has ruled the Palestinian enclave since 2007.

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### Pitfalls

Behind the scenes, Qatar was triangulating between Israel and Hamas and Qatari ambassadors had met with the families of hostages around the world, Ansari said.

“They know that there are children, there are women, there are families that are suffering every day, from the lack of information from the fact that they don’t know what is happening with their family members right now. So it’s a renewed sense of duty on us,” he said.

Qatar has hosted Hamas’s political office for more than 10 years, but is also home to the largest US military base in the region.

“Qatar has an advantage that the other candidates for negotiation do not have: It has housed the political leadership of Hamas” for the last decade, said Hasni Abidi, director of the Geneva-based Center for Studies and Research on the Arab World and the Mediterranean.

That is the only entity authorized to negotiate on behalf of Hamas and the Islamist movement’s armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, Abidi added.

Qatari money has helped Hamas pay the salaries of its civil servants, while the current emir’s father and predecessor Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani even visited Gaza in 2012.

But the position is not without potential pitfalls for the Gulf state. Two weeks into the conflict in Gaza, the US cautioned its ally that there could be “no more business as usual with Hamas.”

In 2017, Qatar’s neighbors, led by Saudi Arabia, imposed a three-year diplomatic and economic [blockade on the tiny emirate](https://www.timesofisrael.com/topic/qatar-crisis/), demanding it cut ties with Hamas and the Palestinian terrorists’ parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as downgrade ties with Iran.

### Taliban office

The first glimmer of hope for the release of the Gaza-held hostages came in October when US hostages Judith Tai Raanan and her daughter Natalie Shoshana Raanan [were released](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-releases-two-hostages-american-mother-and-daughter-judith-and-natalie-raanan/) and returned to Israel.

After that release, French President Emmanuel Macron hailed Qatar’s “very important role.” Two more Israelis were subsequently released. An Israeli soldier was also rescued by security forces.

World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder on Wednesday offered Doha the body’s “profound gratitude… for their significant role in facilitating the impending release.”

It was with Qatar that $6 billion of frozen Iranian funds from South Korean banks was parked pending the release in a hugely complex and sensitive swap deal of the five American citizens held by Iran.The emirate had invited the Taliban to open an office in Doha with the approval of the United States, making it possible to negotiate the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in 2021

Qatar also played a role in the release in 2013 of a Swiss teacher kidnapped in Yemen and in the release of hostages in Mali the same year.

Most recently, on October 16, while all eyes were on Gaza, Qatar announced that it had repatriated Ukrainian children, who had been abducted by Russia during the invasion.

In its work, Qatar has now largely overshadowed Egypt, which helped secure the 2011 release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit after he was held by Hamas for more than five years. Shalit was exchanged for over 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners held by Israel.

“It is precisely the accumulation of these successful mediations which has also made Qatar an essential interlocutor,”

These weren’t for use in the hospitals, but below them. That’s why they were smuggled among boxes of cookies,” “has not approved the entry of fuel into Gaza.”

### Israeli battle plans ‘significantly refined’

The senior Biden administration official also said Friday that Israel “significantly refined” its original military plan for its war against Hamas following talks with the US.

Pressed on whether Washington is having discussions with Israel about the growing numbers of civilian casualties, the senior official insisted that the US is “asking hard questions and constantly asking and ensuring there’s clarity about the objectives [they’re] seeking.”

“They have significantly refined what originally was their plan,” the official said in a phone briefing with reporters on condition of anonymity.

A ceasefire “depends on the Israelis feeling secure and ensuring something like this cannot happen again,” the official said.

A “pause,” on the other hand, would allow for safe passage of civilians and for more flow of aid into Gaza

looks to see that significantly ramped up over the coming over the coming days.”

The official also revealed that Israel agreed to a humanitarian pause on October 20 to secure [the release of two American hostages](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-releases-two-hostages-american-mother-and-daughter-judith-and-natalie-raanan/) from Hamas captivity.

The administration official explained that negotiators needed to receive assurances from Israel and Hamas that the hostages would be able to travel safely for what was “not a short distance” to reach the border from where they were being held in Gaza.

“There was a time period for that, and it went… like clockwork to get them out,” the official said in reference to what they refer to as a “trial humanitarian pause.”

The senior administration official said a much longer humanitarian pause will be required if a deal is struck to bring about the release of 240 hostages.

A “framework to get the hostages out of Gaza… is very much ongoing,”

“IDF forces will remain in control of the Strip, we will not give it to international forces,” Netanyahu said, according to a readout from his spokesperson, not saying whether it would do so for the short or long term.

Netanyahu and his government have been vague on what they envision for Gaza after the war. Only hours earlier the premier [told](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-isnt-seeking-to-displace-gazans-or-rule-enclave-netanyahu-reassures-us/) Fox News that Israel does not want to re-occupy or govern the Strip. Earlier this week, Netanyahu told ABC News that Israel will have “overall security responsibility” over the Gaza Strip “for an indefinite period” after the war against Hamas ends.

US officials have raised the possibility in recent weeks that an international force, possibly with troops from neighboring Arab allies, could manage security in the Strip for an interim period until it can be returned to a functioning Palestinian government, which Washington hopes will be the Palestinian Authority.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday [called on Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-opposes-reoccupation-of-gaza-after-netanyahu-talks-of-indefinite-control/) not to reoccupy the Strip once its war with Hamas ends.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas reiterated on Friday that the PA is ready to retake control of Gaza, but said that would only happen if the move is part of a comprehensive political solution that includes a Palestinian state established along the 1967 borders. The PA leader made the same [pledge](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/abbas-pa-will-take-responsibility-for-gaza-if-comprehensive-political-solution-reached/) on Sunday during a meeting in Ramallah with Blinken

He also repeated his allegations that Israel is carrying out “genocide” in Gaza as it battles Hamas there, and called for an international peace conference to provide “international guarantees” and a timetable to end Israeli control of the Palestinian territories.

The group meeting between Netanyahu and local leaders was his first since the October 7 attacks by Hamas terrorists, which saw some 1,400 people killed, most of them civilians, and over 240 abducted to Gaza.

The prime minister had come under fire for waiting over a month to meet the local leaders, criticism that intensified this week as he met settlement mayors before sitting down with the municipal heads of the area devastated by Hamas.

The mayors told Netanyahu they want a different security reality after the war is over and urged him not to agree to a ceasefire until all Gaza terrorists are eliminated, the statement from the premier’s spokesperson said. They also called for a robust government support program to support their communities as the fighting continues.

Netanyahu said in a statement: “There is a great determination by [the residents] and the government to restore things to an even better state than before. To rehabilitate, to build, to grow. And first of all to bring back security, to ensure there is no Hamas and that Hamas does not return, but also to ensure there is strong life [in the communities] afterward.”

“The State of Israel is the one that brought our great enemy upon us… The leadership brought us to this place.”

Netanyahu is the only senior Israeli official who has refused to make a full-throated admission of responsibility for the horrors of the Hamas attacks, and is likely to face growing calls to depart office once the war ends or abates.

“I think Israel will for an indefinite period have security responsibility,” Netanyahu told ABC News. “We’ve seen what happens when we don’t have that… security responsibility, what we have is the eruption of Hamas terror on a scale that we couldn’t imagine.”

 “Do you believe that you should take any responsibility?” And he replied: “Of course. It’s not a question,” adding that there would be time after the war “to allocate” that responsibility.I’ve said that there are going to be very tough questions that are going to be asked, and I’m going to be among the first to answer them,”

Pressed again on whether he should take any responsibility, Netanyahu answered: “Of course. That’s not a question. It’s going to be resolved after the war. I think there’ll be time to allocate that.”

As far as practical, little pauses — an hour here, an hour there — we’ve had them before. We’ll check the circumstances in order to enable humanitarian goods to come in or our hostages, individual hostages to leave,”“There would be a ceasefire for that purpose, and we’re waiting for that to happen,”

“We consider ourselves at the beginning of this conversation, not at the end of it, so you can expect that we’re going to continue to advocate for temporary localized pauses,”IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Monday ground forces were “deepening the pressure on Gaza City” after they managed to isolate and surround the northern part of the Strip.

He said the IDF killed several Hamas field commanders during [overnight airstrikes and operations](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-believes-it-caused-significant-damage-to-hamas-tunnels-in-overnight-strikes/), which “significantly harms Hamas’s ability to carry out counterattacks.”

On Hamas’s tunnel network, Hagari said combat engineering forces were demolishing every tunnel they come across using “different and diverse devices.”

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Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also touted the IDF’s operations in Gaza over the past day, calling them “very impressive.”

“The combination between the air force and ground forces shakes the Gaza Strip,” “some of them were the ones we eliminated a day or two ago and they were replaced by others, and they were also eliminated.”

Gallant said Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar “hides in his bunker and lets the field commanders die.”

(Israel Defense Forces)

Israeli forces on Monday pushed further into the Gaza Strip and were reportedly nearing the enclave’s main Shifa Hospital — which Jerusalem says is located above Hamas’s command center — as they continued to target Hamas’s underground tunnel network and military capabilities, after launching intensive strikes against the terror group the night before.

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Massacre at Majdal Shams

Keep Watching

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“The combination between the air force and ground forces shakes the Gaza Strip,”

Commenting on the Hamas field commanders that Israel has killed in airstrikes, Gallant said “some of them were the ones we eliminated a day or two ago and they were replaced by others, and they were also eliminated.”

Gallant said Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar “hides in his bunker and lets the field commanders die.” “Our commanders go at the front of the force, lead and achieve,”

” an apparent warning to Iran and its proxies.

“We are already a month into the war, hitting Hamas very, very hard, hitting the leadership of Hamas, hitting the commanders, hitting the terrorists, destroying Hamas’s infrastructure in Gaza, and we are also constantly ready for other areas,” Halevi told soldiers at the Nevatim airbase. “This [air] base knows how to reach anywhere in the Middle East.”

“We never did anything like this. With very heavy munitions, a very good connection between what the [ground] force needs and what the plane knows to give,” he said. “This connection of air and land together, we always knew it was strong, we see now that it is much stronger than we knew.“We never did anything like this. With very heavy munitions, a very good connection between what the [ground] force needs and what the plane knows to give,” he said. “This connection of air and land together, we always knew it was strong, we see now that it is much stronger than we knew. “The unfolding catastrophe makes the need for a humanitarian ceasefire more urgent with every passing hour,”“The parties to the conflict — and, indeed, the international community — face an immediate and fundamental responsibility: to stop this inhuman collective suffering and dramatically expand humanitarian aid to Gaza,”The nightmare in Gaza is more than a humanitarian crisis. It is a crisis of humanity,”Israel’s Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan said in response that Guterres has “rotten morals” for not persistently calling on Hamas to surrender and demanding the release of the at least 240 hostages held in the Gaza Strip.

By failing to do so, Guterres “has lost his moral compass and must not stay even for another minute in his position,”

“Any UN representative who makes the false moral comparison between a brutal terrorist organization that commits war crimes, and a law-abiding democracy, proves himself to have rotten morals and should immediately resign from his position,”“Shame on you,” he wrote, addressing Guterres. “More than 30 minors — among them a 9-month-old baby as well as toddlers and children who witnessed their parents being murdered in cold blood — are being held against their will in the Gaza Strip.”

“Hamas is the problem in Gaza, not Israel’s actions to eliminate this terrorist organization,”

“More journalists have reportedly been killed over a four-week period than in any conflict in at least three decades,” “Without fuel, newborn babies in incubators and patients on life support will die,“The way forward is clear. A humanitarian ceasefire — now. All parties respecting all their obligations under international humanitarian law,” “clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing.”

“Let me be clear: No party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law,”

Guterres did not name Israel. He [outraged Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-livid-after-un-chief-says-hamas-attacks-did-not-occur-in-vacuum/) on October 24 at a Security Council meeting where he alleged violations of humanitarian law and said that the Hamas attacks “did not occur in a vacuum,” leading Israeli officials to accuse the UN chief of justifying violence.

Guterres denied that was his intention and on Monday repeated his condemnation of “the abhorrent acts of terror perpetrated by Hamas,” and urged the Islamist terrorists to free hostages taken on October 7

“the deep concern” in Turkey “for the terrible toll” in Gaza.

“We are working, as I said, very aggressively on getting more humanitarian assistance into Gaza and we have very concrete ways of doing that,”

“I think we will see in the days ahead that the assistance can expand in significant ways,” he added, without providing details.

A Turkish diplomatic source said Fidan pressed Blinken for “an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.”

“Fidan also pointed out to his US counterpart Blinken that bombing civilian targets and destroying infrastructure in Gaza is unacceptable,”

### Tough talks

Blinken’s talks with Fidan would have been packed with problems even before Israel launched a relentless bombing and expanding ground campaign aimed at eradicating Hamas, after the terror group’s shock assault last month against Israel, in which Palestinian terrorists slaughtered over 1,400 people — the vast majority civilians, massacred amid brutal atrocities — and took over 240 hostages.

The Hamas-run health ministry said nearly 10,000 people — allegedly mostly civilians — had been killed in more than four weeks of war in Gaza. The figure cannot be verified independently and is believed to include both the terror group’s fighters and those killed by Palestinian rockets that misfired.

meeting at the foreign ministry in Ankara, on November 6, 2023. (Adem Altan/AFP)

ANKARA, Turkey — US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that Washington was working “very aggressively” to dramatically expand the amount of aid reaching trapped civilians in Gaza amid the Israel-Hamas war.

The top US diplomat held 2.5 hours of one-on-one talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan that were focused on soothing the anger at both Israel and the West by one of Washington’s most strategic but difficult allies.

NATO member Turkey has been an increasingly vocal critic of the way Israel has been pursuing its month-long offensive against Hamas terrorists who staged an October 7 onslaught in southern Israel — massacring 1,400 people in the deadliest attack in Israel’s history.

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Police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse hundreds of protesters who marched on an air base housing US forces in southeastern Turkey hours before Blinken’s arrival Sunday.

Hundreds more rallied outside the Turkish foreign ministry during his visit.

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself was traveling across Turkey’s remote northeast on Monday, in an apparent snub of Washington’s top diplomat.



Trucks carrying humanitarian aid enter the southern Gaza Strip from Egypt via the Rafah border crossing on November 2, 2023, as the war between Israel and the Palestinian terror group Hamas continues. (Mohammed Abed/AFP)

Blinken told reporters after the meeting that Washington was aware of “the deep concern” in Turkey “for the terrible toll” in Gaza.

“We are working, as I said, very aggressively on getting more humanitarian assistance into Gaza and we have very concrete ways of doing that,” Blinken said before boarding a plane for Japan.

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“I think we will see in the days ahead that the assistance can expand in significant ways,” he added, without providing details.

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Smoke billows following an Israeli strike in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on November 6, 2023, during the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinian terror group Hamas. (Said Khatib/AFP)

The war threatens to have broad repercussions on Washington’s relations with Turkey.

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Ankara has a muscular foreign policy and stakes in conflicts across the Middle East that occasionally fail to align with those of Washington or other NATO allies.

Washington is currently anxious to see Turkey’s parliament finally ratify Sweden’s stalled drive to join the US-led NATO defense organization.

The United States has also been tightening sanctions against Turkish individuals and companies that are deemed to be helping Russia evade sanctions and import goods for use in its war on Ukraine.

And Ankara is upset that the US Congress is holding up the approval of a deal backed by US President Joe Biden to modernize Turkey’s air force with dozens of US F-16 fighter jets.

Turkey also has longstanding reservations about US support for Kurdish forces in Syria who spearheaded the fight against Islamic State group jihadists but are viewed by Ankara as an offshoot of the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Ankara has stepped up airstrikes against armed Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq in reprisal for an October attack on the Turkish capital, claimed by the PKK, in which two assailants died.

Blinken called his talks in Ankara “very good, lengthy, and productive.”

But he provided few details about the outstanding dispute and highlighted Turkey’s “commitment” to accept Sweden into NATO.

Blinken faced a chorus of Arab calls to support an immediate ceasefire in Gaza during a whirlwind tour of the Middle East that saw him visit both Iraq and the West Bank on Sunday.

Israel says it could accept a humanitarian pause to allow in additional shipments of aid once Hamas frees the hostages.

Blinken said on Monday only that a “pause could help” secure more aid deliveries to Gaza.

On April 9, the Turkish government launched a bevy of trade restrictions on Israel, the stated aim of which was to penalize the Jewish state for the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip and the resulting humanitarian crisis there.

Though Turkey is close to recession and continues to suffer from the runaway inflation that has plagued it for years, the overwhelmingly conservative Turkish public didn’t just support starting a trade war with Israel — it demanded it.

The restrictions against Israel came just days after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) suffered a major defeat in local elections for the first time since 1977, with Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir electing mayors from the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) party.Opposition parties from the right and the left alike have long played on Turks’ keen support of Muslim coreligionists in Gaza, criticizing Erdogan’s government for its continued trade with Israel during the war. The government and media consistently have presented the war as a defensive one for Hamas.

While the Turkish public is aware that the Israel-Hamas war began on October 7, the largely government-influenced national media has downplayed the Hamas atrocities that sparked the conflict to such an extent that the majority of the public is unaware that they occurred.Instead, most people believe that Israel unilaterally attacked Gaza, and Erdogan, who has described Hamas as holy warriors fending off an Israeli offensive, feeds this misconception

On October 7, thousands of Hamas-led terrorists burst across the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, air and sea, killing some 1,200 people and seizing 253 hostages of all ages under the cover of a deluge of thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns and cities.

The majority of those killed were civilians — including babies, children and the elderly. Entire families were executed in their homes, and many additional victims — including 360 at the Supernova music festival near Kibbutz Re’im — were also slaughtered amid horrific acts of brutality.

Public opinion in Turkey has not been kind to any implication of culpability on the part of Hamas — no matter how slight.

On February 27, Ozgur Ozel, president of the secular CHP — which leads Turkey’s opposition with the second-most parliamentary seats after Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party — described the October 7 atrocities as a terror attack that sparked a “disproportionate” response from Israel.

He was subsequently lambasted in the Turkish media for his “scandalous” statement. The party has since refrained from mentioning Hamas altogether, choosing instead to focus on Gaza’s civilian casualties.Self-destructive but popular

The Turkish drive to punish Israel with economic sanctions has not changed even as global opinion has appeared to once again favor the Jewish state following an Iranian drone and missile attack on April 13. Likewise, there hasn’t been significant concern about retaliatory sanctions being imposed against Turkey by the United States and Israel.

The Jewish state was the 13th-largest receiver of Turkish exports in 2023, and trade between the two countries totaled $5.42 billion, according to the Turkish Exporters’ Union and statistics agency Turkstat.

On April 15, human rights activist and lawmaker from the pro-Kurdish People’s Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu called to take the trade restrictions a step further and institute a complete ban on trade with Israel.

Currently, the restrictions prevent the exportation of 54 products to Israel

AdvertisementCHP’s Ozel also criticized the government’s continued business with Israel throughout the war, saying that “trade with Israel is a betrayal of Palestine.”

Doing business with the Jewish state has also become fodder for accusations and witch hunts.

Journalist Metin Cihan claimed incorrectly on April 7 that a company owned by Hilmi Durgun, deputy head of the National Action Party (MHP) in Antalya, was in fact the Turkish branch of the Israeli multinational agriculture corporation Haifa Group.

Durgun vehemently denied the claim, saying that his company, Agrosel Tarim, merely purchased raw materials to produce fertilizer from the Haifa Group, which he called the world’s leading producer and supplier of such products.

The MHP generally maintains that Israel is responsible for the war in Gaza, and party leader Devlet Bahceli has called the IDF operations there “inhumane.”The Turkish opposition party that openly took the strongest stance against Hamas was the Good Party (IYI), whose leader Meral Aksener targeted Erdogan’s support for Hamas while criticizing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at her party’s national conference in November.

“Hamas’s massacre of civilians obscured Palestine’s rights under international law and served Netanyahu’s dirty agenda, thus inflicting the biggest blow on the Palestinian people,” she said.

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Somewhat differing views

While the Turkish public isn’t entirely undivided about the nuances of restricting trade with Israel, it’s widely taken for granted that the Erdogan government’s current restrictions are inadequate — especially when viewed in light of the Palestinian death toll.

This may reflect the effects of Erdogan’s Islamist policies in Turkey and a belief in the Muslim world’s collective responsibility for the well-being of coreligionists. Alongside this is the conviction many conservatives hold that Turkey’s rightful place is at the forefront of any initiative to aid its fellow Muslims — one that likely stems from residual feelings of imperialism and the belief that despite being officially secular, the modern Republic of Turkey is the heir of the Ottoman Caliphate.The Times of Israel interviewed a number of private citizens who voiced divergent opinions about the trade restrictions, but all of whom requested that their surnames be withheld due to the sensitivity of the topic.

A journalist named Humeyra believes that while Hamas’s October 7 atrocities were wrong, they were a result of Israel’s longstanding policies. She holds both Israel and Hamas responsible for civilian deaths. She supports Erdogan’s decision to impose restrictions on trade with Israel.

“Until now, the government was only responding verbally to Israel’s attacks on the Palestinians, which have increased over the last six months. The Turkish people have taken to the streets many times to support the Palestinians since the first day,” Humeyra said. “I think restricting trade was a late but correct decision.”

Haluk is concerned about a flood of Gazan refugees if Turkey becomes overly involved in the Israel-Hamas conflict. (Courtesy)

A sizable minority of Turks, however, prefer an isolationist approach this time around, after millions of Syrian refugees flooded into Turkey following the country’s involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Haluk, who works in tourism, complains about uncontrolled migration to Istanbul and says that the only role Turkey should play in Gaza is to provide humanitarian aid, worrying that any further involvement risks getting the country mired in another refugee crisis.

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“This situation with the refugees has caused serious problems, both economic and sociological,” Haluk said. “If we do anything to create a new wave of migration, it’s just going to cause even more serious economic problems.”

And then there are those who believe that Turkey and Israel share common interests.

Usame, a communications and media major at Istanbul University, believes that neither Israel nor the Palestinians have just cause to harm innocent civilians. He also believes that Turkish and Israeli interests are not diametrically opposed.

“I don’t think most people really understand what happened on October 7 with the attack launched by Hamas, and I think the media and many politicians are responsible for this,” said Usame. “Turkey and Israel both want to see a democratic Middle East — but first, the war in Gaza needs to end.”

The Israel Defense Forces has launched an internal probe of possible violations of international law by troops during the ongoing war against the Hamas terror group in the Gaza Strip, the Haaretz daily reported Tuesday.

A specially formed team of investigators will look into various incidents, including the alleged killing of dozens of civilians in a strike that targeted a Hamas commander and the mistaken shooting of three escaped Israeli hostages who were abducted from Israel during the devastating Hamas October 7 attack that sparked the war.

IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi appointed former military Operations Directorate chief Yoav Har-Even to lead the team. It will operate under the auspices of the military’s top-tier General Staff Fact-Finding Assessment Mechanism.examine reports and complaints regarding the violation of Israeli and international law during the fighting.”

The mechanism has begun the process of collecting data and information about the various events that took place during the fighting and is in the initial probe stages.”The team has already met several times recently to prioritize a list of incidents it intends to look into, the report said. The team will present its findings to the military advocate, which will decide whether to open a military police investigation into any of the cases.

According to Haaretz, in most of the cases on the list, there were many civilian casualties or there was significant damage to sites such as hospitals, educational institutes, and administrative buildings.

One incident that will be examined is the targeted strike on Ibrahim Biari, Hamas’s Central Jabaliya Battalion commander, during which dozens of civilians were said to have been killed.

The team will also probe the bombing of the Red Cresent headquarters in southern Gaza’s Khan Younis last month. According to the Red Crescent, five people were killed and three others were wounded in the strike. At least 14,000 displaced people were sheltering in the building and a nearby hospital, it said.

Another case is expected to be the demolition of the Israa University campus last month. The destruction of educational sites requires approval by the IDF chief of staff and a legal opinion backing the military need to damage the site.

Head of IDF Southern Command Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman already probed the incident and the findings were presented to Halevi. It found that the demolition did not have the appropriate approval. Halevi ordered significant disciplinary measures against the engineering forces involved, Haaretz reported.

The IDF said at the time that the campus and its surroundings were used by Hamas to attack Israeli forces but admitted that bringing down the building had not been given the required authorization.The team will also probe the fatal shooting of three Israeli hostages who escaped captivity and tried to present themselves to soldiers while waving a white banner and with their hands raised. Tragically, troops opened fire on Yotam Haim, Samar Talalka, and Alon Lulu Shamriz, killing all three.

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Although there has already been a probe of the matter, the results of which were presented to the families of the hostages and the military advocate, the latter asked the new probe team for additional investigative material. Based on the final results, a decision will be made on whether to open a military police investigation into the unit that opened fire on the hostages, and whether to file indictments.

Military investigators are already looking into incidents in which soldiers are said to have set fire to hundreds of buildings in Gaza. Halevi has also spoken to commanders about the phenomenon, stressing to them that it is prohibited and illegal.

Sources told Haaretz that Halevi’s warnings have had only limited success in curbing the setting of fires. While in some cases commanders reportedly ordered the torching of buildings used by Hamas because there were not enough demolition charges to destroy the structures, the practice has allegedly become more commonplace, with soldiers starting fires without any authorization.

The probe will also look at the deaths of 21 reserve soldiers during the planned demolition of a building that went awry when Hamas fighters attacked the force, causing explosives to detonate prematurely.

However, the probe will not for the time being investigate the deaths of three hostages who died in a tunnel close to the place where the commander of Hamas’s Northern Gaza Brigade, Ahmed Ghandour, was killed in an IDF strike as he hid in a tunnel.Hamas propaganda video released a week after Sherman, Beizer, and Toledano were found showed the three and claimed they had been killed in an Israeli airstrike.

An initial IDF probe has found that the three Israelis were not killed in the strike.

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War erupted on October 7 when Hamas led a cross-border attack from Gaza on Israel that killed 1,200 people, most of them civilians. The thousands of terrorists who invaded southern areas also abducted 253 people who were taken as hostages in Gaza, where over half remain captive.

Israel responded to the attack with an air, sea, and ground offensive to destroy Hamas, remove it from power in Gaza, and free the hostages.

Halevi previously appointed Har-Even to head a team investigating the military and intelligence failures that enabled the Hamas attack, but later halted its work due to political criticism.

According to the Haaretz report, senior military officials accept the need for the current legal probe even if it leads to prosecuting soldiers, seeing it as necessary for the continuation of the offensive in Gaza.

The report said Halevi and other senior officers have repeatedly communicated to commanders on the ground the need to adhere to regulations and keep within the bounds of international law.

But commanders have pushed back, saying they can’t keep an eye on every single officer or soldier who decides to act of his own accord.Halevi was said to be against any probes of the military in the early stages of the war, fearing it would distract commanders at a time when large numbers of troops were engaged in the fighting. However, as the intensity of the conflict has waned, the army sees an opportunity to begin probing alleged violations that will require questioning commanders and taking testimony from soldiers.

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The development came as Israel is preparing to defend itself in the International Court of Justice in The Hague where South Africa has brought a case accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza.

One of Israel’s main contentions in staving off international war crimes prosecutions is that troops are ordered to adhere to international law and that any violations are dealt with by Israel’s own robust military and civilian justice systems.

The terrorists bring inappropriate clothes, clothes for dolls and turn the girls into their dolls. Dolls on a string with which you can do whatever you want, whenever you want,” testified Aviva Siegel, who was abducted on October 7 from Kibbutz Kfar Aza with her husband Keith, who remains in captivity.

Slim majority believes return of hostages should be primary war aim in Gaza — poll

While 47% of Jewish Israelis support prioritizing the return of the hostages, 60% say a deal must not come at the cost of halting the war against Hamas

Israelis attend a rally calling for the release of Israelis held hostage by Hamas terrorists in Gaza, at Hostages Square in Tel Aviv, February 3, 2024. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

Israelis attend a rally calling for the release of Israelis held hostage by Hamas terrorists in Gaza, at Hostages Square in Tel Aviv, February 3, 2024. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

 10

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is under increasing public pressure to secure the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, with a narrow majority of Israelis prioritizing their return over toppling Hamas as the country’s primary war aim in Gaza.

Just over half of Israelis (51 percent) expressed support for such a policy, which rose to 69% among Arab Israelis, according to the Israel Democracy Institute’s January 2024 Israeli Voice Index, a monthly survey of national public opinion.

Among Jewish Israelis, opinions were more evenly split, with 47% expressing support for prioritizing the return of the hostages and 42% saying that removing Hamas from power should take precedence. Only 8% of Arab Israelis said that they considered the defeat of Hamas to be a higher priority.

Israel launched its military campaign in Gaza after thousands of terrorists invaded the south of the country on October 7, rampaging through communities and killing some 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and taking another estimated 253 people hostage.

Israel believes over 130 hostages remain in Gaza, not all of them alive. The IDF has confirmed the deaths of 29 of those still held by Hamas, citing new intelligence and findings obtained by troops operating in Gaza.

Despite Netanyahu’s assertion that “only military pressure” will lead to the hostages’ release, more and more Israelis have taken to the street to call on his government to accept a framework for a prisoner swap with Hamas.

Families of hostages held in Gaza march to the Prime Minister’s Office and the Knesset in Jerusalem on December 12, 2023, demanding a resumption of negotiations (Jessica Steinberg/Times of Israel)

Relatives of the hostages have told The Times of Israel that they feel like they have “been forgotten” and that it is critical to negotiate an agreement with Hamas as soon as possible.

Testifying before the newly established Knesset caucus on victims of sexual and gender violence in the war against Hamas last month, released hostages described the horrors being inflicted on those remaining in Gaza.

“The terrorists bring inappropriate clothes, clothes for dolls and turn the girls into their dolls. Dolls on a string with which you can do whatever you want, whenever you want,” testified Aviva Siegel, who was abducted on October 7 from Kibbutz Kfar Aza with her husband Keith, who remains in captivity.

Netanyahu has ruled out releasing thousands of Palestinian prisoners for the hostages. He has also rejected a key Hamas demand — ending the war and withdrawing the IDF — as a condition for any further hostage releases, insisting that the war will end only when Hamas is destroyed and all hostages released.

During a Likud faction meeting on Monday, the prime minister touted the fact that Israel had already secured the freedom of 110 of the hostages during a temporary truce in November and said that while he would “continue to act on this issue… Hamas has demands that we will not agree to.”

“The formula to their freedom should be similar to the previous agreement,” but the remaining hostages’ return “will not be realized at any cost,” he declared, predicting that Israel will achieve a “complete victory over Hamas” within a relatively short period.

“We will kill the Hamas leadership, so we must continue to act in all areas of the Gaza Strip. The war must not end before then. It will take time — months, not years.”

We felt that the influx of tourists was starting to be good at the end of September, the beginning of October,”“We aren’t working at all,” she said. “There’s no one.”“2023 was the year that we recovered from the COVID [pandemic] and it was supposed to be the most successful year in Israel’s history,” he said“Concerning 2024, things are completely dependent on how long this war will be, and also whether there will be a deeper confrontation in the north,” he said.

The current estimation at Israel’s Tourism Ministry is that — even if fighting in Gaza subsides and there is no war with Hezbollah — 2024 as a whole already appears “a bit lost,”“If everything goes okay, we see the end of 2024 coming back to normality,” he said.

In the basilica in Nazareth, one of the caretakers, Friar Wojciech Boloz, said he hopes the usual crowds will soon come back.

“We feel a little bit empty without the pilgrims,” he said.

Tourists and pilgrims not only fuel the local economy, Boloz said. “They give their life to this church.Clear violations of international human rights and humanitarian laws, including war crimes and possibly other crimes under international law, have been committed by all parties,” Turk told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. “It is time — well past time — for peace, investigation and accountability.”

Tiv chided attendees who gave a rousing round of applause to Palestinian Ambassador Ibrahim Khraishi after he said: “Unfortunately, some condemn what happened on October 7, and with the strongest terms possible too, but no one remembers or condemns the killing of children, women and elderly.”

Those who applauded “should be ashamed” of themselves, TivYou shouldn’t be able to sleep at night, because there are kids on both sides that are being killed,” Turk, who was presenting a report on the human rights situation in Gaza and the West Bank, said his office had recorded “many incidents that may amount to war crimes by Israeli forces.” He added there were also indications that Israeli soldiers have engaged in “indiscriminate or disproportionate targeting” in violation of international law.He said such an assault would increase the risk of atrocity crimes, spur more displacement and “sign a death warrant for any hope of effective humanitarian aid.”

s of the middle of February, the Gaza Health Ministry had reported more than 28,000 Palestinians dead in the war precipitated by the murder, rape, and kidnapping conducted during Hamas’s raid on Israeli border settlements and towns on October 7, 2023. Press accounts estimate that in the northern Gaza Strip, almost 80 percent of buildings may be damaged or destroyed. To avoid being caught up in the most intense fighting, according to the United Nations, as many as 85% of the 2.2 million people in Gaza may have left their homes as of mid-December. The scale of death and destruction arising from Israel’s legitimate counterattack has precipitated charges of war crimes and genocide against Israel in the International Court of Justice.

The Israeli government has claimed that it is adhering to its well-developed system for assessing combat in light of the laws of war. But if that is the case, then why has the Israeli offensive produced so much damage and death?

One answer is simple. When war is fought among civilians, civilians are killed. Among the most poignant examples is from World War II: the number of French citizens killed by Allied bombing in the months prior to the June 1944 Normandy invasion. The Allies bombed lines of communication heavily to prevent the Germans from reinforcing their coastal defenses along the English Channel. Historians suggest that some 20,000 French civilians who had the misfortune of living near ports, bridges, roads, or railroad infrastructure were killed in these attacks and during the subsequent two months of ground and air operations.Some would say that this is ancient history; we would never do that again. But more recent history suggests that, though modern weapons are considerably more accurate and procedures in Western militaries to avoid collateral damage are more formalized, fighting among civilians, especially in urban areas, always means hell on earth for the civilians who may be trapped there.2016 and 2017, a US-led counterterrorism coalition and its Iraqi and Syrian (mainly Kurdish) allies aimed to destroy the Islamic State terror group and eject it from the larger cities that it held in Iraq and Syria — first Mosul, and then Raqqa. These battles were immensely destructive, despite coalition efforts to mitigate civilian harm and the United States’ possession of a lavish supply of the most accurate weapons ever produced.

Like the US and its allies in Iraq and Syria, Israel chose as its objective the destruction of its adversary. That’s why those earlier wars provide important insights into what Israel knew it would face in Gaza, and they help to explain its military strategy, tactics for the campaign, and the level of death and destruction that we have witnessed.

The campaign to destroy Islamic State in Mosul lasted from October 2016 to July 2017. Nearly 94,000 Iraqi troops attacked an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 Islamic State fighters. As many as 29,000 aerial munitions may have been employed by the United States and its partners during the fight, plus uncounted artillery shells fired mainly by Iraqi security forces. Of a pre-battle population of roughly a million people, an estimated 9,000 to 11,000 civilians died, at least a third of them from coalition fire, a third due to Islamic State actions, and a third from causes that are impossible to attribute. Roughly 9,900 structures were damaged or destroyed, including some 65 percent of residential construction.

The Raqqa campaign, which lasted from June to October 2017, is particularly instructive because it was conducted almost entirely under US control. Between 30,000 and 40,000 Syrian and Kurdish militia members fought between 2,900 and 5,600 Islamic State fighters. The militias that did the ground fighting had all been organized and armed by the United States. Most of the air and artillery support was provided by Washington, with some assistance from allies, and the United States attempted to hew closely to the laws of armed conflict.

somewhat reduce the destructiveness of the campaign, the largest bombs employed were in the 500-pound category. US Air Force figures suggest that as many as 15,000 aerial munitions were employed against targets in Raqqa during those five months, with US Marine Corps artillery adding 35,000 155 mm artillery shells (perhaps 1,750 tons of shells) to the mix.

Raqqa was also bombed and shelled heavily prior to the 2017 offensive. But after the campaign was complete, the bodies of roughly 4,100 civilians were found under the rubble, along with those of some 1,900 individuals wearing “military gear.” Nongovernmental organizations estimate that somewhere between 774 and 1,600 of the civilian casualties were caused by coalition fire. And approximately 11,000 building structures were damaged or destroyed, rendering 60% to 80% of the city uninhabitable.

In Raqqa and Mosul, most civilians seem to have perished due to building collapses caused by bombs and shells, but in Mosul, the ratio of damaged buildings to civilian deaths was about 1-to-1, whereas in Raqqa, it was about 3-to-1.

Though they are cautious in their conclusion, analysts at the Rand Corp. — a US-funded think tank — attribute the lower rate of civilian casualties per building in Raqqa relative to Mosul mainly to one simple factor — a very high percentage of Raqqa’s pre-battle civilian population of roughly 300,000 people left the city, some prior to the battle and some during it.Hamas presented Israel with a very difficult military problem, even more difficult than Mosul or Raqqa. The degree of difficulty explains a lot about the terrible trajectory of the Israel-Hamas war. (Reasonable questions have also been raised about the impact of how IDF military lawyers interpret provisions about civilians in the standard international treaties on the conduct of warfare — while there is not much evidence that the IDF deliberately targets civilians, some of the destructiveness may be explained by an overly broad interpretation of proportionality and precaution measures.)

Whatever else one can say about Hamas, it is a capable and ruthless adversary. The IDF faced four main problems in starting its operation — the size and quality of the Hamas military force; the urban environment; Hamas’s comprehensive preparation of the terrain, especially including hundreds of miles of tunnels and deeply buried bunkers; and Hamas’s systematic integration of its troops and prepared defenses with the civilian populationsize and quality of the Hamas military force creates a major problem in its own right. Observers estimate that at the outset of the fighting, Hamas had between 15,000 and 40,000 soldiers, with its actual combat power reportedly concentrated in five brigades. At minimum, this is three times the combat power that Islamic State had in either Mosul or Raqqa — on the higher end of the estimate, more than 10 times Islamic State’s combat power. This alone would produce a significantly more difficult and destructive offensive campaign. (As another point of comparison, it is estimated that 8,000 Ukrainian troops, in perhaps four small brigades, defended Mariupol from a much larger and better-equipped Russian force for three months in early 2022.)

Hamas troops also appear to be well trained, and they benefited from advice by more experienced military experts, both from Hezbollah in Lebanon and from Iran. Hamas’s forces, so far as can be known, are well equipped with light and heavy infantry weapons — such as assault rifles, sniper rifles, machine guns, shoulder-fired anti-tank rocket launchers, mortars, and anti-tank guided missiles. Hamas has manufactured and imported hundreds of artillery-type rockets, most of them unguided, and some with ranges as long as 150 kilometers (93 miles). Hamas also avails itself of commercially available off-the-shelf surveillance technology, including drones and digital cameras.the well-equipped, armored forces of the IDF met these Hamas troops on a flat plain, they probably would make short work of them. But a well-trained and well-armed infantry force becomes formidable in an urban environment.

The urban environment favors the tactical defense because it provides the defender with concealment, cover, and canalization. The US military concluded as much following its experiences combating Islamic State; one report released in September 2017 states that “[e]xperiences in Mosul reaffirmed that urban terrain strengthens the defense.”

Buildings provide multiple hiding places. Basements offer not only hiding spots, but also natural bunkers, which can be used to shelter from enemy weapons and protect one’s own fighters so they can shoot effectively. Where there are tall buildings, upper floors provide firing positions and unobstructed fields of fire for long shots down city streets, and they also enable observation of enemy movements. Streets and roads channel the movement of adversary forces; they are natural positions for an ambush.

These attributes can easily be improved by defenders. Holes are knocked in walls within buildings to permit movement from room to room and building to building, obscured from view. Tunnels and trenches are also dug from building to building. Basements and upper floors can be reinforced with sandbags to protect against bullets and shrapnel, as well as with vertical steel and wooden beams to prevent ceiling collapse. Bunkers and firing positions are often built in the interior of buildings, with weapons sighted through holes cut in several layers of interior and exterior walls to confuse the targets about the source of fire. Entrances and stairways are mined and booby-trapped against infantry assault.

Because of the urban environment and the ease with which it can be improved, the defender usually has another line of defensible positions to which it can retreat under pressure, starting the whole process of attack and defense over again.

There was no shortage of materials available to Hamas to improve its defenses despite an ongoing Israeli blockade. United Nations statistics show that significant quantities of construction material were imported into Gaza in the past nine years— 50,000 truckloads permitted in 2022 alone, making up 50% of supplies arriving in the enclave, whereas only 25% of deliveries contained food and 4% contained humanitarian supplies provided by international organizations. Given the group’s administrative control over Gaza, it would be surprising if the construction efforts thus supplied were not influenced by Hamas, and that materials were not skimmed from civilian projects to support underground construction of bunkers and tunnels.

The effect of an urban environment on offensive operations is almost always an increase in the attacker’s reliance on firepower. In Raqqa, the United States and its partners relied heavily on precision-guided weapons, bombs, missiles, rockets, and artillery. They paid careful attention to the rules of war and often employed the smallest practical weapon to the target. (There seems to have been a hidden cost to this practice, because in Raqqa, three weapons were dispatched against each target on average, presumably to ensure that it was destroyed. Thus, the use of less destructive munitions seems to ensure that more munitions are fired to achieve the desired effect.)

In these battles, the nature of the urban environment — coupled with an experienced, committed, and well-armed adversary — were enough to require the coalition to conduct a locust-like offensive in which these munitions, fired in support of advancing ground forces, gradually consumed Raqqa, just as they did Mosul.

It should not be a surprise, therefore, that the IDF now finds itself destroying a great many structures in Gaza.

Hamas further improved the urban environment with a vast subterranean construction project — a deeply buried tunnel network that seems to serve both tactical and strategic purposes. Some tunnels link together fighting positions to support tactical maneuvers, surprise counterattacks and ambushes, and resupply efforts. Others permit leaders to move from their residences to their offices. Some lead to bunkers, which allow command and combat groups to work and rest underground. Presumably, other bunkers contain reserves of ammunition, including long-range rockets. And little has been said about where Hamas builds its weapons, but it seems likely that there are small fabrication facilities underground.

As there are hundreds of miles of tunnels according to most sources, and the Israelis only show snippets of what they find, it could be that much of the network is pretty basic. But most of the videos and photographs that have emerged show what appear to be narrow but well-constructed, usually steel-and concrete-reinforced single file passages, while some tunnels are much wider. Living quarters and possible prisons have also been discovered. The tunnels have numerous camouflaged, vertical shafts for entrance and egress. It also appears that electric cables are strung along the ceilings, which provides power, but presumably also landline communication, allowing Hamas leaders to evade detection by Israeli intelligence.

The inherent defensive possibilities of the urban environment, combined with a significant subterranean component constructed over many years, produced a vast fortress system. Though they certainly dug tunnels, a complex subterranean network like that built by Hamas fighters was unavailable to the Islamic State defenders of Mosul and Raqqa, creating vast new problems for the IDF beyond those experienced by the US-led counterterrorism coalition.

To try to take buildings and more importantly take the tunnel system solely through a series of tactical ground force engagements would not only take a great deal of time, but it would also immeasurably add to the ground force casualties Israel would have been likely to suffer. No military would embrace this prospect. Moreover, even a direct attack would be very destructive insofar as it would ultimately require the demolition of the tunnels from the inside out using large quantities of high explosives

We cannot know exactly how the IDF chooses which portions of Hamas’s tunnel system to attack from the air, but any sustained attack would depend on bombs of great penetration capability and explosive power. (Western media has been critical of the IDF’s use of one-ton bombs; CNN has analyzed more than 500 large craters in Gaza and found them consistent with those produced by underground explosions.) Because Hamas routes these tunnels under and into buildings throughout Gaza, Israeli attacks inevitably also produce damage on the surface. Though tunnels and underground bunkers are not the only target for the Israeli Air Force, their importance and ubiquity likely induce many of its strikes.

The US military, for example, encountered a large tunnel system near Saigon, called the “tunnels of Cu Chi,” during the Vietnam War. After years of indecisive attacks by ground forces, artillery, and tactical aircraft, Washington loosed B-52 strategic bombers on the tunnel network in 1969 and finally destroyed most of it.

Observers can understand Israeli choices without endorsing them, or more importantly, supporting them. But they should understand the reasons for their opposition. Individuals can oppose Israel’s war on the basis of their own morality, but the United States as a nation, given its own military history, including recent history, does not have much ethical ground to stand on in decrying Israeli strategy.

Neither, for that matter, do Arab governments. Israel is not doing anything that the United States and its Arab allies have not done — and done recently. Some may claim that Washington has had an epiphany and would never do this again, but such a claim is not credible. When the United States is provoked, it is historically quite ferocious. So-called collateral damage results.

Hamas, for its part, appears unconcerned about putting Palestinian civilians in harm’s way. Indeed, this is a feature, not a bug, of their political and military strategy. Some use the term “human shield” for this strategy, but that is incomplete. This element of Hamas’s strategy could also be described as “human camouflage,” and more ruthlessly as “human ammunition

On a daily basis, the activities of civil society obscure Hamas’s activities. More importantly, Hamas understands that civilian casualties are an Achilles’ heel for Western military operations. Liberal democracies put a high value on the individual, and hence on every human life. Lawyers have developed an elaborate legal structure to regulate the conduct of warfare because of this respect for the individual, which is enshrined in international treaties.

Western militaries, including the IDF, try to live by these laws, though the law of armed conflict does not proscribe them from waging war. They try to follow these rules in part because they reflect the values of the societies that they serve and in part because of an expectation of reciprocity, but also because pragmatically, they know that lots of civilian casualties can become a political liability at home and abroad. Hamas spends the lives of Palestinian civilians as ammunition in an information war. They are not the first to do so, and they probably will not be the last.

The course of every urban campaign will be influenced by unique factors, but at the same time, they share similarities. When a capable defender, even in small numbers, has time to prepare a defense in an urban environment, the attacker will meet serious difficulties. The attacking force will always be interested in doing as well as it can at the least cost to itself, especially in terms of its own casualties. This means that it will bring not only all of its cunning to bear on the problem, but also that it will, as has generally been the case in modern times whenever the defense proves strong, bring lots of firepower to the fight

Urban offensives will therefore generally do very serious damage to buildings and infrastructure. If civilians are constrained to remain in these areas of intense combat, for whatever reason, they will suffer immensely, as have the civilians of Gaza.

Cities have grown in size and density as the population of the planet has grown and as more and more people move to cities to be a part of the modern economy. The Israeli offensive in Gaza, the US-led coalition offensives in Mosul and Raqqa, and even the bloody and clumsy Russian siege of Mariupol may not be anomalies.

Instead, they are a window into future war. Rather than imagining pristine military operations, analysts and strategists should better understand the implications of failed diplomacy, or of conflicts simply left unsettled because diplomatic engagement is politically inexpedient.

Few political disputes will be settled by invitational armored battles in empty plains and deserts. War is an extension of politics, and politics happen among people.

The report quoted Eisenkot, a former IDF chief of staff, as telling his National Unity party colleagues in a faction meeting Wednesday that “the prime minister is procrastinating.”

“He does not consult and he does not make decisions on crucial issues,” Eisenkot said, adding that Hamas was benefiting from this inaction.Netanyahu is not deciding who will replace Hamas and this is leading to the fact that about 60% of the aid [entering Gaza] is ending up in the hands of Hamas,” Eisenkot said, according to Kan.

“With the prime minister taking his time and not making decisions on the important issues, Hamas is restoring some of its capabilities, returning to the north of the Gaza Strip, and taking over the humanitarian aid,”

His comments came amid renewed negotiations with Hamas for a hostage release deal, with the government needing to decide whether to pursue an agreement, including a pause in fighting, or push ahead in the war against the terror group.

Hamas in recent days offered its response to a framework proposal by Israel and mediators Egypt and Qatar. Reports on that response have indicated the terror group is proposing a four-and-a-half-month truce during which hostages would be freed in three stages, and which would lead to an end to the war. It is also seeking the release of 1,500 prisoners from Israeli jails, a third of whom it wants to select from a list of Palestinians serving life sentences.

In a press conference on Wednesday, Netanyahu rejected Hamas’s “delusional” conditions for a new hostage deal, arguing that only military pressure will secure the release of the Israelis being held captive in the Gaza Strip.Netanyahu’s declaration preempted a meeting set for Thursday in which the war cabinet was set to officially formulate Israel’s response.

Kan reported that there was general dissatisfaction in the National Unity party with the way Israel was responding to Hamas’s latest offer. While the party generally agreed with comments made by Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant largely rejecting the proposal, they were perturbed that these were made before consulting or discussing the issue in the war cabinet.

Party leader Benny Gantz appeared to bash Netanyahu during a press conference on Tuesday evening, accusing coalition lawmakers of sowing division among the public in recent days with inflammatory statements and attacks on the IDF.

Gantz, who brought his National Unity party into Netanyahu’s government days after the October 7 terror onslaught, condemned those in the government “who are conducting divisive discourse in the Knesset, who turn cabinet meetings into attacks on the military, who compare TV studios to our enemies, to those who murdered our sons and daughters.”

Although he did not single out any lawmakers by name, Gantz’s comments appeared to be partly aimed at Netanyahu himself, who has complained of being attacked by the press.Telling his fellow lawmakers that “being a public leader in a time of crisis is a great responsibility,” Gantz called Tuesday for everyone “from all sides of the political map, just before you speak — think about the soldiers and the hostages, think about where we ended up and why.”

“The citizens of Israel deserve more from us than thisthe first few weeks after National Unity joined the government, Gantz and Netanyahu displayed a united front, appearing together in press conferences along with Gallant and seeming to agree on core matters relating to the war.

However, as political disagreements began to resurface in the Knesset, so too have tensions between Gantz and Netanyahu, with the former soaring in public opinion polls while Likud and its leader have dropped sharply.

As the strains between Gantz and Netanyahu became visible, with the two criticizing each other in carefully worded statements on various issues that have split public opinion, there has been growing speculation on how much longer the delicate partnership will last

US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that “the conduct of the response in Gaza” has been “over the top,” in remarks widely understood and reported as a fierce critique of Israel, though it was initially unclear if they were directed at Jerusalem or at Hamas.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre clarified Friday that the comments referred to Israel. “He’s been clear that the US wants to see the Hamas terror organization defeated. That is a shared goal that we have with Israel,” she said. “At the same time, the president has also been very clear that they must do so by ensuring that their operations are targeted and conducted in a way that they are protecting innocent civilians.”

The president made the comments at the tail end of a White House press conference. As he was leaving the room, reporters shouted a hail of questions at him, including about “the hostage negotiations” and “Netanyahu says he’s ordered the IDF…”

The president turned back and said, “The hostage negotiations, look …” and returned to the microphone.

“I’m of the view, as you know, that the conduct of the response in Gaza, in the Gaza Strip, has been over the top.”I think that, as you know, the president of Mexico, Sissi” — Abdel Fattah al-Sissi is, in fact, president of Egypt — “did not want to open up the gate to allow humanitarian material to get in. I talked to him. I convinced him to open the gate. I talked to Bibi [Netanyahu] to open the gate on the Israeli side.”

Biden went on: “I’ve been pushing really hard, really hard, to get humanitarian assistance into Gaza. There are a lot of innocent people who are starving, a lot of innocent people who are in trouble and dying, and it’s gotta stop. Number one.”Number two: I was also in the position that I’m the guy who made the case that we have to do much more to increase the amount of material going in, including fuel, including other items. I’ve been on the phone with the Qataris. I’ve been on the phone with the Egyptians. I’ve been on the phone with the Saudis to get as much aid as we possibly can into Gaza. They’re innocent people, innocent women and children who are also in bad, badly need of help. And so that’s what we’re pushing.

“And I’m pushing very hard now to deal with this hostage ceasefire,” he continued. “Because, you know, I’ve been working tirelessly for this deal — how can I say this without revealing it — to lead to a sustained pause in the fighting in, in the actions taking place, in the Gaza Strip. And, because I think if we can get the delay for that, an initial delay, I think that we would be able to extend that so that we can increase the prospect that this fighting in Gaza changes.”

Biden’s initial “over the top”  remarks had caused some confusion as to whether he was referring to Israel’s operations in Gaza or rather Hamas’s response to a truce proposal — as he had used the same phrase Tuesday to describe the Hamas reaction to a US- and Israel-backed framework proposal for a truce-for-hostages deal.

His Thursday comments were somewhat ambiguous. But they were widely reported as marking a critique of Israel’s conduct of the war against Hamas in Gaza, which US Secretary of State Antony Blinken harshly criticized on Wednesday, and where Biden has previously accused Israel of “indiscriminate bombing. The remarks come as the Democratic president has come under increasing domestic pressure to press Israel on a ceasefire.

The president, in his remarks, also recalled pre-war negotiations on Saudi-Israel normalization, to help Israel fully integrate into the Middle East and defend itself against Iran. And he suggested, without offering proof, that Hamas struck on October 7 to try to prevent this process.Afterward, the president issued a memorandum that requires US allies who receive military aid from the US to provide “credible and reliable written assurances” of their adherence to international law, including international human rights law.

It will also, for the first time, require the State Department and the Department of Defense to issue periodic reports on whether allies are meeting the requirements.

While the memo does not name Israel, it comes amid increasing calls on the US to condition aid to Israel due to concerns over its military actions in Gaza.

War broke out between Israel and Hamas following the October 7 massacre which saw about 3,000 Hamas terrorists infiltrate Israel under a barrage of rockets, killing 1,200 people and abducting 253. An estimated 136 hostages remain in Gaza, around 30 of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel’s ensuing military campaign against Hamas has seen over 27,000 Palestinians killed, according to the Hamas-run Gazan health ministry. These numbers, however, cannot be independently verified and are believed to include over 10,000 members of Hamas’s military wing who have been killed in battle and Gazans killed by misfired rockets.

Following the breakout of the war, Biden offered wholehearted support to Israel. The president visited the country 10 days after the massacre in a show of solidarity and sent two US aircraft carriers to the region to deter the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah from joining the war against Israel.

Biden and other US officials have continued to stand behind Israel’s right to defend itself against Hamas, but have expressed increasing concern over the civilian death toll, suffering and humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, and the lack of clarity from Israel regarding the “day after” in Gaza. And they have pushed for Israel to agree to advance progress toward a two-state solution with a reformed Palestinian Authority ruling in the West Bank and Gaza — with Netanyahu repeatedly rejecting full Palestinian sovereignty and post-war PA rule

After decades of efforts to keep the Hamas threat in check, Gaza’s southernmost city of Rafah — and the Philadelphi Route running between it and Egypt’s border — once again is a major problem for Israel.

Palestinians began digging tunnels under Israel’s border fences during the First Intifada in the late 1980s, and in the ensuing decades, the Israel Defense Forces tried a range of methods to uncover the tunnels and keep terrorist groups from bringing in deadly new weapons.

The focus was on the Philadelphi Route, the 14-kilometer security road dividing the Gazan and Egyptian sections of Rafah. But it was perilous work. During the Second Intifada, the corridor is where 13 IDF soldiers were killed in the 2004 APC Disaster, and Hamas managed to detonate explosives under the JVT outpost, killing five soldiers.

Over the objections of Israel’s security services and many officials, Israel withdrew from the Philadelphi Route in the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza. Israel allowed Egypt to introduce 750 heavily armed border guards, but they failed to prevent a massive increase in smuggling into the Strip.

When Hamas forcibly ejected the Palestinian Authority from Gaza in 2007, they used the tunnels — and occasional destruction of the Egypt border fence — to fill their coffers, and to build up their military capabilities.

Now, four months after Hamas used those weapons to massacre 1,200 Israelis and take hundreds more hostage, Rafah has become a tangled quandary for Israel’s leadership, one that threatens to derail the entire war effort

With the exception of Rafah, Israeli forces have maneuvered into all of Gaza’s cities and driven Hamas fighters underground. It is hard to imagine Israel meeting its war aim of toppling Hamas if it doesn’t take Rafah. Most of the remaining functioning Hamas battalions are in the city, and if Israel doesn’t take control of the border area, the Gaza-ruling terror organization can resume smuggling new weapons in — and potentially hostages or senior leaders out — when the fighting ends.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said as much on Friday. “It is impossible to achieve the war aim of eliminating Hamas while leaving four battalions in Rafah,” his office said in a statemen

growing strategic headache

But the circumstances are becoming more problematic for Israel with each passing day.

From the beginning of the war, Israel told Gazans to move south, and over 1 million civilians are now in and around the city.

Egypt has warned that any ground operation there or mass displacement across the border would undermine its four-decade-old peace treaty with Israel.

“Continuing Israeli strikes on densely populated areas will create an unlivable reality. The scenario of mass displacement is a possibility. The Egyptian position on this has been very clear and straightforward: We are against this policy, and we will not allow it,” said a spokesperson for Egypt’s foreign ministry.

Images in recent weeks circulating on social media have shown Egypt apparently fortifying its defenses at the border, with additional barbed wire and walls.

The US has also been increasingly strident in its warnings about the consequences of an operation in Rafah.

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US State Department deputy spokesman Vedant Patel said on Thursday that the US had “yet to see any evidence of serious planning for such an operation,” adding: “To conduct such an operation right now with no planning and little thought in an area” where one million people are sheltering “would be a disaster.”The White House issued a similar warning.

“Any major military operation in Rafah at this time, under these circumstances, with more than a million – probably more like a million and a half – Palestinians who are seeking refuge and have been seeking refuge in Rafah without due consideration for their safety would be a disaster, and we would not support it,” National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters.

Waiting this long to tackle the strategic border area has already made it less likely that the IDF will be able to do so, at least under the conditions it wants.

Putting off the conquest of Rafah and the border may turn into the biggest strategic mistake of Israel’s ground operation against Hamas.

A canceled plan

The roots of the war’s mismanagement go back years before it erupted.

By the time Hamas jeeps were pouring through dozens of breaches in the state-of-the-art border fence on October 7, it had been almost a decade since the IDF had an operational plan ready for conquering the Gaza Strip and defeating Hamas.

The operational plans of the Southern Command for combat in the Gaza Strip were updated and approved,” wrote Col. Avi Dahan in the IDF journal Ma’arachot. “In the Southern Command, the Gaza Division, and the cross-theater divisions, there were deep operational processes, comprehensive battle preparations were prepared, and professional learning and training processes were carried out.”

The processes, argued Dahan, “increased the professional confidence of commanders and soldiers, amplified the physical and mental readiness, and improved familiarity with the enemy and terrain in Gaza.”

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After Turgeman moved on in 2015, his operational plan was subsequently canceled and not replaced by any of his successors, which include current Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi.

Conquering Gaza was seen as unrealistic given the clear aversion by the political leadership to even countenance reassuming responsibility for two million Gazans.

“Resources are limited,” an officer who worked on operational plans for Gaza during that period told The Times of Israel, “and there was no desire to put resources into a plan that had no chance of being used.”

Indecisive incursion

The lack of a plan to topple Hamas impacted the way the IDF fought after October 7. Because it needed time to draw up plans, the IDF waited three weeks to order the ground incursion into Gaza, not exploiting the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks when sympathy for Israel was at a high on airstrikes that began taking their toll on Gazan civilians.

also affected the intelligence Israel possessed. If there was no chance of maneuvering deep into Gaza, there was little reason to expend resources on mapping out the Hamas tunnels that did not head toward Israel.

That choice has slowed the IDF operation significantly, and has made it far more dangerous for the maneuvering forces.

And when the incursion came in late October, it was not fought in an aggressive fashion that maximized Israeli advantages.

“When the offensive finally began, it seemed that some of its actions were rooted in the concept of indecisive maneuver,” wrote Brigadier-General (res.) Eran Ortal. “Between a decisive approach aimed at quickly taking over crucial enemy positions and one aimed at eliminating terrorists wherever they were, the IDF’s maneuvers were more in line with the latter. A maneuver approach would call for multiple simultaneous efforts to prevent the adversary from retreating and reorganizing.”

Such an offensive should have begun as quickly as possible, with maximum force, while heading towards multiple locations simultaneously,” Ortal continued.

Heading into Gaza City first made perfect strategic sense. The most effective Hamas battalions in terms of rocket fire were in the northern Strip, and their range would be limited somewhat if Hamas had to fire from further south.

Gaza City was also the center of Hamas’s governing capabilities.

But it is not clear why IDF forces didn’t take Rafah at the same time, as envisioned in the plan for retaking Gaza. There were far fewer civilians there at the time, making it easier for Egypt and the US to accept a major operation there.

And less than a month after the Hamas atrocities — and before Gazan casualties had reached unprecedented levels — there would have been far less room internationally to criticize Israel as it kicked off its ground operation.

‘No compromise’?

For now, Israeli leaders promise they will take Rafah. On Wednesday, Netanyahu said he ordered troops to “prepare to operate” in Rafah, after rejecting Hamas’s “delusional demands” in hostage deal talks.

According to the Israeli official, there would be “no compromise” on toppling Hamas militarily and politically, which would mean operating in Rafah.

A second Israeli official told The Times of Israel on Thursday that the operation in Rafah will not be a large-scale assault by a full division like a current operation in Khan Younis, but will instead be organized around targeted pinpoint raids.

Israeli forces also have stepped up airstrikes on the city, and Arabic-language reports say IDF ground forces are approaching the edges of Rafah

None of this means, however, that an operation is a given. An order to “prepare to operate” is different than a directive to attack, and, as Israel is still looking to pressure Hamas to agree to a hostage deal on more favorable terms, threats to take Rafah could make an immediate ceasefire seem more pressing to Hamas leaders.

Netanyahu said that he recognizes that “a major operation in Rafah demands the evacuation of the civilian population from areas of combat,” and that he instructed the IDF to come up with a plan to do so while defeating Hamas forces in the city.

How have the horrors of October 7 and the ongoing nightmare of war in Gaza, conflict in the north, government dysfunction, and global hostility to Israel and Jews impacted Israelis’ preferences for our future direction and governance?

Opinion poll after opinion poll shows the Likud vote collapsing, support for Benny Gantz’s National Unity party soaring, the statesmanlike Gantz much preferred personally as prime minister to the toxically divisive Benjamin Netanyahu, and Netanyahu and his far-right and ultra-Orthodox allies left with scant prospect of retaining power.

Plainly, much of the Israeli mainstream holds the prime minister and his Likud primarily responsible, as the leadership of the nation, for the failure to deter, preempt or prevent the monstrous October 7 Hamas slaughter in the western Negev, and for the abiding absence of post-October 7 governance, with local authorities and civilian activists still struggling to fill the vacuum left by a bloated, bickering and incompetent ministerial menagerie.

Netanyahu’s ongoing capitulation to the far-right — including entertaining the demand by the pyromaniacal Itamar Ben Gvir to deny swaths of Arab citizens of Israel the right to pray at the Al-Aqsa compound on the Temple Mount during Ramadan; and his coalition’s readiness to continue to exempt young ultra-Orthodox men from military service even as the IDF has been calling up recruits ahead of schedule because of the unprecedented strain on the military — is doubtless further alienating many previous supporters.Hamas branded October 7 as “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood,” in order to assert an ostensible religious justification for its barbarism and draw West Bank Palestinians, East Jerusalemites and Israel’s Arab citizens directly into the war. Thus far, it has signally failed. Indeed, the Arab Israeli community — which suffered fatalities and abductions on October 7, and losses in the IDF in Gaza — has seemed to deepen its identification with the nation as a whole.

The idea of exacerbating tensions on the temple Mount with any kind of sweeping ban on Arab Israeli’s freedom of religious access there should manifestly have been dismissed out of hand when raised by Ben Gvir at a cabinet meeting on Sunday, with the Shin Bet chief reportedly warning that it would risk playing into Hamas’s hands and raising the potential for holy war. The notion of maintaining the blanket exclusion from service of the ultra-Orthodox community, when everybody needs to share the burden and national cohesion requires that everybody is seen to be sharing the burden, should also have been more unthinkable now than ever. Not, evidently, to this government.

While IDF soldiers have begun voting — inside Gaza! — for municipal elections, with most of the rest of the country to do so next week, Israel is potentially more than two years away from national elections. Netanyahu, as we know full well, is desperate to retain power and is a far more effective political campaigner than Gantz.

The question, when the day comes, is whether enough Israelis will choose a potentially unifying leadership — committed to consigning the far-right back to the margins, to carefully advancing a process under which the ultra-Orthodox community properly shares the burden of national service, and ideally to promoting progress toward a constitution that anchors the separation of powers between the legislature and the judiciary — over a right-wing/ultra-Orthodox bloc.

A leadership, one should add, more capable of thwarting Israel’s external enemies, and of actually administering the country for the good of all of its citizens.

Limited intel

The IDF continues to believe that it is winning the war against Hamas in Gaza. Three-quarters of the Hamas battalions are no longer functioning. Rocket fire has greatly subsided.

And military officials say they have a plan ready to implement to tackle Rafah in the far south — where four Hamas battalions have had months to prepare and have been substantially bolstered by gunmen who have fled from the north and center of the Strip — including provisions to oversee the evacuation of a million-plus Gazans from there to other areas. The expectation is that taking overall control of Gaza’s southernmost town will require weeks, if not months, of heavy fighting, and the recall of reservist brigades that have been released or the redeployment of standing IDF forces from the unpredictable northern border

The most senior Hamas leadership remains intact and in situ, however, with the IDF saying it has no intelligence indicating that Hamas’s leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, and his cronies have fled the Strip, and most analysts believe that he would be unlikely to do so.There are still thousands of Hamas gunmen in north and central Gaza, and Hamas operatives — still the only governance in town — are commandeering much of the aid that enters the Strip.

And over 130 hostages have suffered an unthinkable 138 days in captivity, with the hair-raising rescue of two of them from Rafah last week only underlining the near-impossibility, thus far, of extracting them.

The rescue of Louis Har and Fernando Marman was both an extraordinary military feat and evidence of pinpoint real-time intelligence. But the screening on Monday of footage of Shiri Bibas and her two toddler sons in Khan Younis immediately after their abduction on October 7, accompanied by IDF Spokesman Daniel Hagari’s talk of further scraps of information that raise grave fears for their fate, underlined the limits of such intel and how much the IDF still doesn’t know about the whereabouts and wellbeing of so many of those who were abducted.

Public diplomacy MIA

The rescue of Har and Marman was largely presented worldwide accompanied by reports that “at least 67 people, including women and children, were killed” in IDF airstrikes that enabled their extraction. As ever, those numbers, and the nature of the Gazan dead, were supplied by Gaza’s Health Ministry, aka Hamas, and are unverifiable. Hagari said the IDF carried out airstrikes “to allow the force to cut off contact and hit the Hamas terrorists in the area,” enabling the rescue. He did not specify how many Gazans were killed, or the relative proportions of gunmen and noncombatants among the dead.

In 2010, when Israeli naval commandos rappelled down to commandeer the Mavi Marmara, part of a flotilla that was seeking to breach the Israeli arms blockade on Gaza and had ignored repeated pleas to turn back, they were beaten with bars and clubs, and opened fire in self-defense, killing 10 people on board. However, Israel’s public diplomacy establishment delayed the publication of footage that showed the incident, citing security concerns, until long after a false narrative had been cemented worldwide asserting that Israeli troops had murdered peace activists on a humanitarian mission

Fourteen years later, hours after the February 12 hostage rescue was announced, I asked members of the grandly titled Israeli Public Diplomacy Directorate whether it could provide any information on how many of the 67 people Hamas claimed were killed in the hostage rescue were Hamas operatives. I also inquired as to whether anyone in the directorate is tasked with trying to obtain that kind of hard information and disseminating it quickly.

I was promised a response. Several times. I was finally told it would be forthcoming “today.” That was last Wednesday

Blinken was in Saudi Arabia for the first of five stops in his fifth regional tour aimed at advancing diplomatic solutions to bring an end to the ongoing war in Gaza after four months.

The secretary discussed “building a more integrated region” with bin Salman, the State Department said following the approximately two hour meeting, using language widely understood to refer to an Israel-Saudi normalization agreement

During their meeting in Riyadh, Blinken also “underscored the importance of addressing humanitarian needs in Gaza and preventing further spread of the conflict,” the State Department says.

Saudi Arabia has said it is still interested in normalizing relations with Israel but that it will be contingent on Israel agreeing to create a pathway for the future establishment of a Palestinian state — something that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has all but rejected

The secretary and crown prince continued discussions on regional coordination to achieve an enduring end to the crisis in Gaza that provides lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike,” the US readout added.

Blinken did not respond to shouted questions from reporters on how it went as he returned to his hotel, but waved as he walked by. No Saudi readout was immediately available.

Blinken is also set to visit Egypt, Qatar, Israel and the West Bank this week and push to advance Egyptian- and Qatari-mediated conversations with Palestinian terror group Hamas on a deal to free Israeli hostages held in the Gaza Strip

En route to Riyadh, a senior US official told reporters that the talks would be a centerpiece of the trip. “It’s not a coincidence that we are going to the three countries that are involved in those talks: Egypt, Qatar, and Israel,” the US official said, while also seeking to manage expectations: “Impossible to say if we’ll get a breakthrough, when we’ll get a breakthrough.” Pieces interlocked

There are 136 hostages or captive remains still being held in Gaza, and their possible release by Hamas is among issues under discussion in the conversations that are mediated by Qatar and Egypt with the backing of the United States, in return for a humanitarian pause and the release of Palestinian security prisoners held by Israel. While officials have noted some progress, they cautioned that gaps remain.

The hostage deal and the humanitarian pause are now seen as instrumental in helping advance conversations on a normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel, which had been frozen in the immediate aftermath of October 7, but resumed in recent weeks Speaking in Davos last month, Blinken said there was “a new equation” in the Middle East in which Israel’s Arab and Muslim neighbors were prepared to integrate Israel into the region, but they needed to see a pathway to creation of a Palestinian state.

Conversations on who would govern Gaza after the war, how the Palestinian Authority needs to be reformed to potentially rule the enclave and obtaining security guarantees for Israel are now moving parts of the same equation, the US official said, adding that achieving results would require compromises from Israelis and Palestinians.

“If we get a humanitarian pause, we want to be in a position to move as quickly as possible on the various pieces of day after – reconstruction of Gaza, [Palestinian Authority] reform, governance of Gaza, two states, normalization. Some of which are obviously quite difficult and quite complex,” the official said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been at odds with the Biden administration over the creation of an independent Palestinian state, saying he would not compromise on “full Israeli security control of all territory west of the Jordan River.”

The talks are at a sensitive phase and any progress will not come easy, the US official added.

The Israel-Hamas conflict has escalated, as Iranian-backed groups have entered the fray and fired on US forces in Iraq and Syria, while Yemen’s Houthis attacked shipping routes in the Red Sea.

The US has been carrying out retaliatory strikes on Iran-backed militias across Syria, Iraq and Yemen, in response to a drone strike last week in Jordan that killed three American troops and wounded dozens.

Blinken will nevertheless try to reinforce the message that the Biden administration neither seeks war with Iran nor wants the conflict to spread further, despite calls by some opposition Republicans in Congress advocating for attacks inside Iran.

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A key priority is for Blinken to “deliver a message directly to countries in the region that the United States does not want to see the conflict escalated and will not escalate the conflict,” the US official said.

“It’s important to show up and say it on one-on-one.”

The Pentagon also said it does not believe Tehran wants war either. Iran has so far avoided any direct role in the conflict, even as it backs those militia groups.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan on Sunday refused to be drawn on whether the United States might attack sites inside Iran. He said Washington did not see a wider war, but would continue to respond if attacked.

There is no reason for the US campaign of retaliation, unfolding since Friday, to derail Washington’s conversations with Arab states and Israel on normalization and post-war Gaza, the senior US official said.

The UN Security Council is set to vote on Monday on a resolution demanding a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, but the United States warned the measure could hurt negotiations to pause the Israel-Hamas war, and is unlikely to back it.The resolution, put forward by the 10 elected council members, is backed by Russia and China, who vetoed a US-sponsored resolution Friday that supported “an immediate and sustained ceasefire” in the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

The 22-nation Arab Group at the UN issued a statement on Friday night appealing to all 15 council members “to act with unity and urgency” and vote for the resolution “to halt the bloodshed, preserve human lives and avert further human suffering and destruction.”It is long past time for a ceasefire,” the Arab Group said. Ramadan began March 10 and ends April 9.

The council is expected to vote on the resolution on Monday morning. The vote was earlier scheduled for Saturday morning, but was delayed early Saturday, according to a UN diplomat.Many members are hoping that the UN’s most powerful body, which is charged with maintaining international peace and security, will demand an end to the war that began after Hamas launched its devastating onslaught in southern Israel on October 7, killing about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking 253 others hostage.

Since then, the Security Council has adopted two resolutions on the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza, but none has called for a ceasefire.

Gaza also faces a dire humanitarian emergency, with a report from an international authority on hunger warning this week that “famine is imminent” in northern Gaza and that escalation of the war could push half of the territory’s 2.3 million people to the brink of starvation.

The brief resolution scheduled for a vote Monday demands an immediate humanitarian ceasefire for Ramadan “leading to a permanent sustainable ceasefire.” It also demands “the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages” and emphasizes the urgent need to protect civilians and deliver humanitarian aid throughout the Gaza Strip.

The draft does not include provisions supporting ongoing diplomatic efforts to secure a ceasefire — an element that was highlighted in the US resolutionUS Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the council after Friday’s vote that the new resolution’s text “fails to support sensitive diplomacy in the region. Worse, it could actually give Hamas an excuse to walk away from the deal on the table.”

“We should not move forward with any resolution that jeopardizes the ongoing negotiations” being carried out by the United States, Qatar and Egypt, she said, warning that if the diplomacy isn’t supported “we may once again find this council deadlocked.”

“I truly hope that that does not come about,” Thomas-Greenfield saidkey issue was the unusual language that said the Security Council “determines the imperative of an immediate and sustained ceasefire.” The phrasing was not a straightforward “demand” or “call” to halt hostilities.

Hamas on Friday voiced “appreciation” after Russia and China vetoed the “biased” US-led draft resolution. It said the draft contained “misleading wording that is complicit” with Israel and “grants it cover and legitimacy to commit a genocidal war against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.”

The vote in the Security Council became another showdown involving world powers that are locked in tense disputes elsewhere, with the United States taking criticism for not being tough enough against its ally Israel, even as tensions between the two countries rise.

Before the vote, Russia’s UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said Moscow supports an immediate ceasefire, but he criticized the diluted language, which he called philosophical wording that does not belong in a UN resolution.

He accused US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the US ambassador to the UN of “deliberately misleading the international community” about calling for a ceasefire.

This was some kind of an empty rhetorical exercise,” Nebenzia said. “The American product is exceedingly politicized, the sole purpose of which is to help to play to the voters, to throw them a bone in the form of some kind of a mention of a ceasefire in Gaza … and to ensure the impunity of Israel, whose crimes in the draft are not even assessed.”If the US was serious about a ceasefire, it wouldn’t have vetoed time and again multiple council resolutions,” he said. “It wouldn’t have taken such a detour and played a game of words while being ambiguous and evasive on critical issues.”

Thomas-Greenfield accused Russia and China of vetoing the resolution for “deeply cynical reasons,” saying they could not bring themselves to condemn Hamas’s massacre in southern Israel on October 7, which the resolution would have done for the first time.

A second “petty” reason, she said, is that “Russia and China simply did not want to vote for a resolution that was penned by the United States because it would rather see us fail than to see this council succeed.” She accused Russia of again putting “politics over progress” and having “the audacity and hypocrisy to throw stones” after launching an unwarranted invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The resolution did reflect a shift by the United States, which has found itself at odds with much of the world as even allies of Israel push for an unconditional end to fighting.

In previous resolutions, the US has closely intertwined calls for a ceasefire with demands for the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza. This resolution, using wording that’s open to interpretation, continued to link the two issues, but not as firmly.

Netanyahu has held off holding security cabinet discussions regarding the so-called “day after” the war, fearing this could lead to fractures in his mainly right-wing coalition. Some of his far-right ministers aim to use such meetings to push for the re-establishment of Israeli settlements in Gaza and the permanent Israeli control of the Strip — policies the premier says he opposes and would surely lead to the dissipation of Israel’s remaining support in the West

Netanyahu has sufficed with saying that he will not allow the Palestinian Authority to return to govern Gaza. He has sometimes qualified this assertion by saying that Israel won’t allow the PA in its current form to return to the Palestinian enclave, indicating that Israel could live with a reformed PA of the kind that the Biden administration has been pushing. Other times, though, Netanyahu has given a more blanket rejection of allowing Gaza to become “Fatahstan” — referring to the political party headed by PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

Notably, the document of principles Netanyahu presented to security cabinet ministers at Thursday night’s meeting does not specifically name the PA or rule out its participation in the post-war governance of Gaza

Instead, it says that civil affairs in Gaza will be run by “local officials” who have “administrative experience” and who are not tied to “countries or entities that support terrorism

The language is vague, but it could rule out groups that receive funding from Qatar and Iran — as Hamas does — or possibly the PA, whose welfare program includes payments to convicted terrorists and their families.

A statement from Netanyahu’s office said the document is based on principles broadly accepted by the public and that it will serve as the basis for future discussions regarding the post-war management of Gaza.

The plan begins by stipulating a principle for the immediate term: The IDF will continue the war until achieving its goals, which are the destruction of the military capabilities and governmental infrastructure of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the return of the hostages abducted on October 7, and the removal of any security threat from Gaza Strip long-term.

The IDF will maintain an indefinite freedom to operate throughout the entire Strip to prevent the resurgence of terror activity, the document says, describing this as an intermediate-term principle.

The plan states that Israel will move forward with its already-in-motion project to establish a security buffer zone on the Palestinian side of the Strip’s border, adding that it will remain in place “as long as there is a security need for it.”

This plan is directly at odds with one of the Biden administration’s own principles for post-war Gaza, which states that there will be no reduction in the enclave’s territory.

The document presented by Netanyahu also offers the most concrete details to date regarding Israel’s plans for the Egyptian-Gaza border, which has been plagued by smuggling both above and below ground. It states that Israel will enforce a “southern closure” on the border to prevent the revival of terror activity.The closure will be upheld with assistance from the US and in cooperation with Egypt “as much as possible,” the document states, in an apparent acknowledgment of Cairo’s disapproval of the plan due to the ostensible violation of its sovereignty.

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Cairo has pushed back against Israeli calls to take over control over the Philadelphi corridor along the Egypt-Gaza border but privately has indicated more flexibility, US and Arab diplomats have told The Times of Israel. Both the US and Egypt, however, are less likely to cooperate with such plans that are not part of a broader initiative aimed at creating a pathway toward an eventual Palestinian state — something Netanyahu rejects.

The document added that the “southern closure will be made up of measures aimed at preventing smuggling from Egypt — both underground and above ground, including at theRafah crossing.”

Also in the intermediate stage, Israel will maintain security control “over the entire area west of Jordan,” from the land, air and sea “to prevent the strengthening of terrorist elements in the [West Bank] and the Gaza Strip and to thwart threats from them towards Israel,” the document states.

Netanyahu’s plan envisions Gaza’s “complete demilitarization… beyond what is required for the needs of maintaining public order.” It adds that Israel will be responsible for realizing this goal for the foreseeable future, potentially leaving the door open for other forces to finish the job down the line.addition to the “local officials” whom Netanyahu envisions being responsible for public order and for providing civil services, the document adds that Israel will also promote a “de-radicalization plan… in all religious, educational and welfare institutions in Gaza.”

This too will be advanced “as much as possible with the involvement and assistance of Arab countries that have experience in promoting de-radicalization.”

This line appears to be a nod at Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but both have repeatedly made clear that they will not play any role in the rehabilitation of Gaza unless it is part of a framework aimed at an eventual two-state solution.

Analysts have also expressed heavy skepticism of Netanyahu’s goal to anoint unaffiliated Palestinian clan leaders, noting the likelihood that any Palestinian community leaders seen openly and unilaterally cooperating with Israel will quickly be delegitimized and possibly find their lives at risk. They say a similar effort was advanced by the United States after it invaded Iraq two decades ago only to backfire.Another key aspect of Netanyahu’s document of principles is the shuttering of the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA. The document notes the alleged involvement of 12 UNRWA staffers in the October 7 onslaught and says Israel will work to replace the agency with “responsible international aid organizations.

In the short term, however, a senior Israeli official briefing The Times of Israel last month said that Jerusalem opposes UNRWA’s immediate dissolution. The official explained that UNRWA currently is the main aid distribution organization on the ground and that its shuttering risks a humanitarian catastrophe that could force Israel to cease its fighting against Hamas.Notably, the document clarified that Israel will only allow the reconstruction of Gaza to begin after the completion of the Strip’s de-militarization and the commencement of the “de-radicalization process.”

“The rehabilitation plan will be financed and led by countries acceptable to Israel,” the document states, again coming at odds with many of the countries seen as potential donors, who demand that Gaza’s reconstruction be in tandem to a political horizon for the Palestinians.

Netanyahu’s plan concludes by reiterating a pair of principles adopted earlier this week by both the cabinet and the Knesset: that Israel outright rejects any international dictates regarding a permanent settlement with the Palestinians, which should only be reached through direct negotiations between the parties, without preconditions; and that Israel will continue to oppose the unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state, which it views as a “reward for terror.

During a visit with fighters in the Nitzan 636 Field Intelligence Battalion near Jerusalem, the premier said: “While you and the IDF are preparing to continue fighting, there is international pressure to keep us from entering Rafah and finishing the job. As prime minister of Israel, I am deflecting these pressures, and I will continue to do so.”

Israel says Rafah is the last major Hamas stronghold in the Palestinian enclave after the Israel Defense Forces systematically dismantled and destroyed the terror group’s battalions throughout most of the Strip.

The premier has been adamant about the IDF’s need to push into Rafah for weeks, having claimed in late February that total victory in Gaza would be “weeks away” once the incursion begins.

But more than half of Gaza’s 2.3 million residents have sought refuge in the southern city on the Gaza-Egypt border as war has ravaged much of the territory. Israel’s allies, including the US, have expressed intense reservations regarding a potential IDF incursion into the southern Gazan city, warning of the potential for massive harm to civilians The US has previously said Israel must show it has a plan to protect civilians when it launches a ground offensive in Rafah. And US officials told the Politico news site in a Monday report that US President Joe Biden said he would consider placing conditions on future military aid to Israel if its military moves ahead with a planned offensive without an American green light

US officials subsequently relayed to their Israeli counterparts that the Biden administration would support a limited operation in Gaza’s southernmost city that would prioritize “high-value” Hamas targets in and underneath the city instead of a large-scale offensive, Politico reported, citing four US officials

At the end of the day, we cannot win this war without defeating Hamas’s battalions in Rafah,”

One point three million people are waiting there in a very small space. They don’t really have anywhere else to go right now… If the Israeli army were to launch an offensive on Rafah under these conditions, it would be a humanitarian catastrophe.

This could only lead to a humanitarian catastrophe of a new magnitude and to forced displacement of populations, which would constitute violations of international human rights and bring additional risk of regional escalation,

Israeli leaders have said that the goal of dismantling Hamas cannot be completed without clearing Rafah of terrorists and destroying suspected smuggling tunnels under the border with Egypt.

We will fight until complete victory and this includes a powerful action in Rafah as well, after we allow the civilian population to leave the battle zones

Some Gazans have begun packing their belongings in readiness to move but others have vowed to stay put, fearing even greater misery and starvation in the bombed-out hometowns they fled.

Ahlam Abu Assi said she “would rather die” in Rafah than return to the famine-like conditions facing relatives who stayed in Gaza City.

“My son and his children have nothing to eat. They cook a handful of rice and save it for the next day,” she said. “My grandson cries from hunger.

I fled Al-Maghazi, came to Rafah, and here I am, returning to Al-Maghazi,” said Jarwan, referring to the town from which she fled earlier in the war.

“Last night in Rafah was very tough. We’re going back to Al-Maghazi out of fear — displaced from one area to another; hopefully Al-Maghazi area would be safe, God willing.”

Wherever we go, there is no safety,” she said.

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said the text could jeopardize “sensitive negotiations” aimed at brokering a pause in the war

The United States does not support action on this draft resolution. Should it come up for a vote as drafted, it will not be adopted,”

It is critical that other parties give this process the best odds of succeeding, rather than push measures that put it — and the opportunity for an enduring resolution of hostilities — in jeopardy,” Thomas-Greenfield said.

The likely council vote comes as Israel plans to storm Gaza’s southernmost city of Rafah, where over a million people have sought refuge, prompting international concern of a sharp worsening of the humanitarian crisis in the Strip.

It is not our intention to provide any safe areas or facilities, but necessarily if this was a case we will deal with the humanity that is necessary

The goal we can achieve is to eliminate the ideology behind Hamas and propose alternatives that respond to the aspirations of both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples,”

This is very hypothetical. We have constantly been dealing with maintenance on our border so I think it is jumping to conclusions to what those activities constitute,” Shoukry said of construction activity seen around the border.

French President Emmanuel Macron in which both leaders agreed on the “necessity of the swift advancement of a ceasefire.”

The languishing efforts to pause the four-month-old war came as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed on Saturday to reject international appeals to scrap plans for an operation in Rafah.

“Those who want to prevent us from operating in Rafah are essentially telling us: ‘Lose the war.’ I won’t let that happen,” Netanyahu vowed at an evening press conference in Jerusalem. “We won’t capitulate to any pressure.

Israel’s point man on hostages, Gal Hirsh, told CNN on Sunday that the operation in Gaza’s southernmost city “is next of course, because in Rafah there are many hostages and many terror groups. Actually Hamas is still there.”

He said that while Israel does “everything possible” to avoid civilian casualties, there are “many, many” Palestinians currently taking shelter in Rafah, whom “Hamas is using right now as human shields.”

We want a deal, very much,” he said. “And we know we need to pay prices. But Hamas’s demands are disconnected from reality, delusional.

Hirsh also raised doubts that the Hamas sources making demands in talks were not in touch with the terror group’s operatives on the ground in Gaza who are holding the hostages.

“I very much want to see the proof,” he said. “Such proof can be, for example, show us that the medical support that was sent to our hostages has arrived to its destination.

Hirsh was referring to a deal announced by Qatar in mid January according to which medications were supposed to be supplied to the hostages in return for a large amount of medical supplies and other aid for Gazans.

Meanwhile, Palestinian medics and witnesses in Gaza said Israeli strikes in Khan Younis, Rafah and Gaza City killed at least 18 people overnight and into Sunday.

An airstrike in Rafah overnight reportedly killed six people, including a woman and three children, and another strike killed five men in Khan Younis, the main target of the offensive over the past two months. Associated Press journalists saw the bodies arrive at a hospital in Rafah.

The UN’s top court on Friday rejected South Africa’s request to put more legal pressure on Israel to halt a threatened offensive against Hamas in the Gaza city of Rafah, saying it was “bound to comply with existing measures.”

South Africa had requested urgent measures to safeguard Rafah amid Israeli plans for a campaign in the city, Hamas’s last bastion in the enclave.

Pretoria has already filed a complaint against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, alleging that its assault on Gaza amounts to a breach of the Genocide Convention. The court has yet to rule on the underlying issue, but on January 26 it ordered Israel to ensure it took action to protect Palestinian civilians from further harm and to allow in humanitarian aid. It declined to grant South Africa’s central request to order Israel to halt its military campaign.The ICJ said in a Friday statement that the “perilous situation” in Rafah “demands immediate and effective implementation of the provisional measures indicated by the Court in its Order of 26 January 2024, which are applicable throughout the Gaza Strip, including in Rafah, and does not demand the indication of additional provisional measures.”

The World Court added that Israel “remains bound to fully comply with its obligations under the Genocide Convention and with the said Order, including by ensuring the safety and security of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.”South Africa announced Tuesday that it had lodged an “ urgent request ” with the International Court of Justice to consider whether Israel’s military operations targeting the southern Gaza city of Rafah breach provisional orders the court handed down last month in a case in which Pretoria alleged genocide in the Strip.

On Thursday, Israel urged the court to reject what it called South Africa’s “highly peculiar and improper” request

Israel says it does all it can to spare civilians and is only targeting Hamas terrorists. It says Hamas’s tactic of embedding in civilian areas makes it difficult to avoid civilian casualties.

Even so, the court last month ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death and destruction in Gaza, but stopped short of ordering an end to the military offensive that has laid waste to the Palestinian enclave.

On Thursday Israel assailed South Africa’s latest attempt to have the ICJ halt its campaign against Hamas, and accused Pretoria of abusing the Genocide Convention to protect the Islamist terrorist group.

In a short document, Israel described Pretoria’s entire application as “unfounded in fact and law” and “morally repugnant

Israel insisted that there had been no change in the situation in Gaza on the ground since the ICJ heard South Africa’s genocide allegations in January, and said that the “unprecedented military offensive in Rafah” of which Pretoria spoke “in fact has not happened.”

Israel described South Africa’s claims of an “unprecedented military operation” in Rafah on February 11 to rescue two Israeli hostages — which Hamas said killed dozens of Palestinians — as an “outrageous distortion,” and asserted that it was Hamas that was demonstrating “contempt for the law” by failing to accede to the ICJ’s call for the immediate and unconditional release of all remaining hostages

Israel also pointed out that South Africa’s request for ICJ intervention, based on supposed concerns of impending genocide, actually cited comments by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “that make clear that any potential military operation is intended to target Hamas battalions in Rafah,” and noted that Netanyahu had himself spoken of the necessity of evacuating civilians from the city

This announcement is in line with Israel’s enduring commitment under international humanitarian law to minimize harm to civilians, even as Hamas — in its utter contempt for life and for the law — continues its abhorrent strategy of seeking to maximize such civilian harm through its ongoing attacks against Israeli civilians and through its use of Palestinian civilians and civilian objects as shields in Gaza itself,” Israel insisted forcefully in its submission.

Jerusalem said that South Africa’s use of Netanyahu’s statement that clearly emphasized Hamas was Israel’s target “exposes yet again an intention to abuse the Genocide Convention” and have the court “micro-manage” the conflict, the conduct of which is governed not by the Genocide Convention but by international humanitarian law over which the court has no jurisdiction in this war.

“It is evidence of a renewed and cynical effort by South Africa to use provisional measures as a sword, rather than a shield, and to manipulate the Court to protect South Africa’s longtime ally Hamas, a genocidal terrorist organization, from Israel’s inherent right and obligation to defend itself, in accordance with the law, from the terrorist assault it faces and to pursue the release of over 130 hostages,” declared Israel.

The soldiers have found mortars, grenades and other weaponry belonging to Hamas inside the medical facility, as well as medications with the names of hostages on them.

The IDF on Friday denied claims that troops targeted generators at the hospital. Hamas had claimed several patients had died due to a lack of oxygen after power was cut off and the generators stopped following an IDF raid.

This morning, a report was received concerning the interruption of generator activity, resulting in the failure of electrical systems within the hospital. Contrary to the allegation, IDF troops did not target the generators. The troops were instructed to ensure the continuous functioning of the hospital

Despite the generator malfunction at the hospital, all vital systems continued to operate throughout the day based on the existing Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS) system in the hospital,” the IDF said.

The IDF said that upon receiving reports of the generator malfunction at the hospital, troops worked to repair it, while the Navy’s Shayetet 13 commando unit brought in a replacement generatorThese actions were carried out in close coordination between the IDF and the hospital administration through officers of the Coordination and Liaison Administration for Gaza (CLA),” the IDF said.

The IDF said it also brought food and water to Nasser Hospital, as well as coordinated with international aid organizations to supply fuel for the medical center.

Meanwhile, the IDF continued its campaign throughout different parts of the Gaza Strip with widespread airstrikes and battles between troops and gunmen.

As the fighting continued in Khan Younis, the IDF said Saturday that troops led by the 7th Armored Brigade raided several compounds, finding weapons including explosive devices, grenades and Kalashnikov rifles.

Troops in the area also called in several air strikes on Hamas forces including three terrorists who were trying to launch rockets.

In addition, a paratrooper force killed a terror cell in close-quarters combat, the IDF said.The IDF also said that there were also clashes in central Gaza where Nahal soldiers killed several operatives.

Meanwhile, rocket warning sirens sounded in the Ashkelon area on Saturday morning, with the IDF saying one rocket fired from northern Gaza was intercepted by the Iron Dome air defense system.

The IDF said within half an hour of the attack, the Hamas terrorist behind the attack was struck and killed.

The rocket had been fired from the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood in Gaza City. Within 30 minutes, the IDF said the Nahal Infantry Brigade and 215th Artillery Regiment identified the operative behind the attack, and called in an airstrike, killing him.

In Rafah, humanitarian conditions have become increasingly severe, with continued reports of people stopping aid trucks to take food,” he said. “Vulnerable segments of the population include children, the elderly and people with underlying health conditions are particularly susceptible to the risk of malnutrition.”

Egypt, fearing that the crisis may lead Palestinians to seek refuge in the country via Gaza’s southern border, has begun building a wall to prevent that from happening, satellite images analyzed by The Associated Press showed.

While Egypt has not publicly acknowledged the construction of the wall, the country has warned Israel against forcing the Palestinian population currentlysheltering in the southern Gazan city of Rafah from crossing the border.

Netanyahu told the cabinet meeting that the two had “all kinds of suggestions and advice,” and while it was appreciated, Israel would nevertheless “make our own decisions, and the State of Israel will do everything necessary to defend itself.”

Acknowledging Israel’s right to make its own decisions, Cameron told the press in Israel on Wednesday that while it was clear there would be retaliation against Tehran, he hoped that it would be carried out “in a way that is smart as well as tough and also does as little as possible to escalate this conflict.

Iran and its proxies such as Hezbollah or the Houthis must not be allowed to add fuel to the fire

Netanyahu’s office said earlier that during his meetings with the German and British foreign ministers, the prime minister “reiterated that Israel would maintain its right to self-defense.”

The two visiting diplomats also met earlier Wednesday with President Isaac Herzog and Foreign Minister Israel Katz, with all the conversations focused on the potential of an Israeli retaliation.

Reiterating her call for Israel to exercise restraint, Baerbock said that “everyone must now act prudently and responsibly.”

I’m not talking about giving in. I’m talking about prudent restraint, which is nothing less than strength,” the German minister said. “Because Israel has already shown strength with its defensive victory at the weekend.”

Nobody would benefit from hitting back at Iran, she said. “Not Israel’s security, not the many dozens of hostages still in the hands of Hamas, not the suffering population of Gaza, not the many people in Iran who are themselves suffering under the regime, and not the third countries in the region who simply want to live in peace.”

The real need is to refocus back on Hamas, back on the hostages, back on getting the aid in, back on getting a pause in the conflict in Gaza,”

Soldiers were engaged in close combat against Hamas forces, killing fighters in gun battles, and ambushing gunmen with snipers, as well as calling in airstrikes.

Troops raided a number of sites, finding weapons, explosives, grenades, rifles, and other military equipment. A rocket launcher and a long-range projectile were found hidden in a refrigerator in a medical lab in the area, the army said.

The IDF also confirmed it had wrapped up a “precise and limited operation” at Nasser Hospital, where some 200 terror suspects were nabbed, some of whom are alleged to have links to the October 7 onslaught on southern Israel and the taking of hostages. Some 1,200 people were killed in the Hamas-led assault on communities near Gaza that sparked the war, and another 253 taken hostage, mostly civilians.

The IDF confirmed it had found sealed boxes of medication with the names of Israeli hostages on them in the hospital, part of shipments apparently send by relatives without the Israeli government’s involvement.

Israeli hostages had been previously held at Nasser Hospital, according to testimonies from released captives and interrogated terror suspects.

The army said weapons belonging to Hamas operatives were also found during several days of operations in the hospital.

The World Health Organization had said the hospital, Gaza’s second largest and crucial to the territory’s crippled health services, was unable to function during the weeklong raid, calling it “a massive blow to Gaza’s health system.”

However, the army said it had taken pains to “ensure minimal disruption to the hospital’s ongoing activities and without harming patients and medical staff,” delivering a replacement generator after the hospital’s stopped functioning during the operation and enabling fuel to be delivered to the premises to keep the generator running. It denied that power to the medical center had been interrupted and said it said it “coordinated the entry of professional officials to examine the electricity problem in the hospital.

Food, water, medical supplies, and infant formula were also delivered to Nasser Hospital with IDF coordination, it said

Fighting also raged in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, an area previously conquered by troops but where forces have recently been redeployed. Airstrikes rocked sites across the Strip, including attacks on cells operating drones in southern Gaza and the coastal Shati area of Gaza City

Amid concerns of a worsening humanitarian crisis in the Strip, with shortages of food, water and medicine reported, the health ministry said on Saturday that a two-month-old baby identified as Mahmud Fatuh had died of “malnutrition” in Gaza City.

Save the Children said the risk of famine would continue to “increase as long as the government of Israel continues to impede the entry of aid into Gaza.

Israel has defended its track record of allowing aid into Gaza, saying that 13,000 trucks carrying relief supplies had entered the territory since the start of the war.

Multiple reports indicated the outline includes the release in the first phase of some 40 hostages held in Gaza, consisting of women, children, female soldiers, and elderly and ill abductees, along with a pause in fighting of some six weeks.

It also includes the release by Israel of hundreds of Palestinian terror convicts, and a “redeployment” of Israeli troops within Gaza — but not a complete withdrawal as Hamas had previously demanded. The outline would also reportedly see Israel enable the return of Palestinian women and children to northern Gaza, from where hundreds of thousands evacuated during the fighting, and which Israel has kept cut off from the rest of the enclave.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signaled Saturday night that the expected push into Rafah had not been abandoned, adding that “at the beginning of the week, I will convene the cabinet to approve the operational plans for action in Rafah, including the evacuation of the civilian population from there.”

“Only a combination of military pressure and firm negotiations will lead to the release of our hostages, the elimination of Hamas, and the achievement of all the war’s goals,” he added.

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Israel’s global allies have voiced deep concerns over the harm an offensive could cause, with the city full to bursting with civilian refugees from throughout the Strip.

Israel says it must take Rafah to ensure Hamas’s destruction and to free the remaining hostages held by terrorists.

During a visit to northern Gaza, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi said military pressure on Hamas was “the most effective” action to bring about a potential hostage deal with the terror group, as talks were held in Paris on the latest proposals for an agreement.

There is a connection between these things,” he said during an assessment with officers. “Your achievements — another battalion dismantled, more underground infrastructure [demolished], another neighborhood where [Hamas] infrastructure is destroyed and the population is evacuated to safety — all these things are pushing us, I very much hope, toward achieving the release of hostages.

This is a goal of war. We intend to do a great deal to realize it, and the fighting effort is the most effective action that helps those who are negotiating for the release of the hostages,” Halevi added.

The IDF also released footage showing airstrikes and tank shelling of Hamas operatives during operations in the Strip

Amid the 7th Brigade’s operations in Khan Younis, the IDF said troops spotted eight Hamas operatives approaching them, before eliminating them with an Iron Sting guided mortar. It published footage of the strike.

Meanwhile, concern deepened Saturday over the growing humanitarian crisis in the war-torn enclave, with aid agencies warning of unprecedented levels of desperation and looming famine.

As civilians in the besieged territory struggled to get food and supplies, UNRWA warned Gazans were “in extreme peril while the world watches.”

In northern Gaza’s Jabaliya refugee camp, bedraggled children held plastic containers and battered cooking pots for what little food was available.

According to an Axios report Saturday, the US has asked Israel to stop targeting Hamas policemen who are escorting aid convoys in Gaza. The report, citing three US and Israeli officials, comes after aid groups suspended deliveries to northern Gaza this week saying that the convoys were being overrun by hungry crowds.

According to Axios, the Biden administration asked Israel to stop targeting members of the Hamas-run civilian police force, warning that a “total breakdown of law and order” is significantly exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the enclave.

US officials say at least 11 Hamas policemen have been killed in Israeli strikes in recent weeks.

The report said Israel rebuffed the American request, telling the administration that a clear goal of the war was to end all Hamas control in Gaza and that Israel was working on alternative plans to ensure law and order.

Separate reports in Israel on Saturday indicated cautious optimism on the prospects of reaching a temporary truce and hostage release deal with Hamas that would see a pause in the fighting more than three months after the previous halt in late November in which over 100 hostages were freed.

Channel 12 reported that war cabinet ministers were to vote by phone later on whether to endorse an outline proposed by international mediators in Paris for a hostages-for-truce outline.

It said the deal apparently provides, in a first phase, for the release of some 40 hostages in return for the release of hundreds of Palestinian security prisoners and a truce of some 6 weeks. These would be mostly female, elderly and ill hostages.

We still don’t believe that this is the right time for a general ceasefire that leaves Hamas in control and alleviates any responsibility for them to release the hostages,” White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said after the vote. The vetoed resolution did, however, include a call for the “immediate and unconditional release of the hostages.”

In a surprise move days ahead of the vote, the United States circulated a rival UN Security Council resolution that would support a temporary ceasefire in Gaza linked to the release of all hostages, and call for the lifting of all restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid. Both of these actions “would help to create the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities,” the draft resolution obtained by The Associated Press says.

US Deputy Ambassador Robert Wood told several reporters Monday that the Arab-backed resolution is not “an effective mechanism for trying to do the three things that we want to see happen — which is get hostages out, more aid in, and a lengthy pause to this conflict.”

With the US draft, “what we’re looking at is another possible option, and we’ll be discussing this with friends going forward,” Wood said. “I don’t think you can expect anything to happen Tomorrow

We don’t believe in a rush to a vote.” The official, speaking on condition of anonymity ahead of council discussions on the US draft, said, “We intend to engage in the coming days in intensive negotiation around it… That’s why we’re not putting a timeline on a vote, but we do recognize the urgency of the situation.”

He pointed to some 1.5 million Palestinians who sought safety in Gaza’s southern city of Rafah and face a “catastrophic scenario” if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu goes ahead with his announced plan to evacuate civilians from the city and move Israel’s military offensive to the area bordering Egypt, where Israel says Hamas has its final stronghold.

In addition to a ceasefire now, the Arab-backed resolution rejected the forced displacement of Palestinian civilians, called for unhindered humanitarian access throughout Gaza and reiterated council demands that Israel and Hamas “scrupulously comply” with international law, especially the protection of civilians. Without naming either party, it condemned “all acts of terrorism.”

The US draft resolution says Israel’s planned major ground offensive in Rafah “should not proceed under current circumstances.” It also warns against further displacement of civilians, “including potentially into neighboring countries,” a reference to Egypt, a move that would likely have serious implications for regional peace and security.

Though gaps remain, the key elements are on the table,” she said, and the deal remains the best opportunity to free the hostages and have a sustained pause that would enable lifesaving aid to get to needy Palestinians.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was recently in the region, hoping to get a hostage deal. But Qatar said Saturday the talks “have not been progressing as expected,” leading the Arab Group to decide over the weekend that they had given the US enough time and put their resolution in final form for Tuesday’s vote.

The Security Council will then likely start discussing the much-lengthier US draft resolution, which would for the first time not only condemn Hamas’s October 7 attack, but its hostage-taking and killing, “murder, and sexual violence including rape.” Some council members blocked the condemnation of Hamas in two previous council resolutions on Gaza.

The US draft doesn’t name Israel, but in a clear reference the draft “condemns calls by government ministers for the resettlement of Gaza and rejects any attempt at demographic or territorial change in Gaza that would violate international law.”

Asked later Tuesday whether the US draft’s call for a “temporary ceasefire” as opposed to a “humanitarian pause” represented a shift in Washington’s stance, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller indicated that it wasn’t

We want to see a temporary stop in the fighting. You can call it a ceasefire, you can call it a pause. Ultimately, we want to see the fight and stop so hostages can get out and humanitarian assistance can get it,” he said during a press briefing.

“The only kind of temporary ceasefire that is going to achieve a release of hostages is one that’s negotiated. Just calling for a temporary ceasefire that Hamas has not agreed to is not going to do anything to get the hostages out, which is why we can continue to pursue diplomacy with Israel and with the governments of Egypt and Qatar to try to and achieve a temporary ceasefire that would secure the release of the hostages.”

“We think that is by far the most productive way forward. It’s what achieved the release of more than 100 hostages last year, and what we think should be the productive path for moving forward now,”

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Saturday said the “terrible” war between Israel and Hamas “must end,” six months since the terror group’s shock onslaught that initiated the fighting.

“We continue to stand by Israel’s right to defeat the threat from Hamas terrorists and defend their security. But the whole of the UK is shocked by the bloodshed,” he said in a statement.

“This terrible conflict must end. The hostages must be released. The aid –- which we have been straining every sinew to deliver by land, air and sea -– must be flooded in,” he added.

Today marks six months since the terrorist outrage of 7th October –- the most appalling attack in Israel’s history, the worst loss of Jewish life since the Second World War,”

Six months later, Israeli wounds are still unhealed. Families still mourn and hostages are still held by Hamas.”

Sunak said the children of Gaza needed a “humanitarian pause immediately, leading to a long-term sustainable ceasefire.”

“That is the fastest way to get hostages out and aid in, and to stop the fighting and loss of life.

For the good of both Israelis and Palestinians — who all deserve to live in peace, dignity and security — that is what we will keep working to achieve,”

The British government on Friday called for “utmost transparency” and a “wholly independent review” into the killing of seven aid workers in the Gaza Strip, which the Israeli military has called a “serious failure” and dismissed two senior officers.

The situation in Gaza is dire and the prospect of famine is real. We remain committed to getting aid to those who so desperately need it,

These steps took precedence over Israel’s prime demand for a release of hostages in exchange for Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, said this official. “Regarding the exchange of prisoners, Hamas was and is willing to be more flexible, but there is no flexibility over our… main demands,” he said.

Early Tuesday morning, the terror group issued a statement confirming that it had received Israel’s latest proposal through Qatari and Egyptian brokers. It called the offer “intransigent,” claiming it did not meet any of its demands. Nonetheless, it said it would study it further before delivering a response to the mediators.

Kirby confirmed that CIA chief William Burns was in Cairo leading the US negotiating team in the talks. “We are waiting for Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar’s response. It could take a few days,” Kirby said.

It’s as good as the Ashkenazim’s,” boasted the practicing Muslim, using the term for Jews of Eastern European origin. Sakis, from the mixed Arab-Jewish coastal city of Jaffa, pointed to the black hijab on her head and quipped, “I wasn’t always a ninja.”

She became observant and started covering her hair after the death of the principal of the high school where she used to teach Hebrew literature to Arab pupils, she recalled. The principal was a Jewish man she greatly admired, and his passing plunged her into a life crisis, prompting her to reconsider her views on mortality and faith. Sakis said, “If there is a Paradise in the afterlife, why wouldn’t I want to go there

Everyone was just so thirsty for an event like this,” said organizer Carolina Frimer, IEA community manager, at the end of the night, adding that there had been a long waiting list to participate.

“Some people told me that when they arrived here tonight, they had a feeling of being in a different country, in a parallel universe. Coming here is a statement, because many will tell you that this is not the time to meet. We’re telling them quite the opposite. Now is exactly the time to meet,” Frimer said firmly.

We see this as a seed of the reality that should happen,” said founder Stolov. “When you come here, you see everyone sitting together like it is natural. And to me, this is natural.”

“We have all these prejudices and demonization of each other, because we don’t have the chance to meet each other. This year, those images of ‘the other’ are magnified and multiplied; therefore, it’s especially important to come back together, look at each other in the eye, and be reminded that we can live together,” he continued. “We don’t need to like everyone, but we can find people that we connect with.”

I put myself in the shoes of the hostages, and then in those of the civilians in Gaza. This situation is very hard for both Arabs and Jews, and it’s even worse with people around us trying to stoke tension. This iftar is what we can do now to bring back hope,” said Abdalnabi. “But the main thing is not to lose our faith. If you don’t believe things can get better, you won’t go far. . “It’s been one of the quietest Ramadans I remember in all my years here,” he remarked.

“There has been a visceral difference from the very first day of the war. I haven’t seen any spitting or cursing or any of that hostile activity; it has been the polar opposite,” he said.

“I see Jews are talking with Arabs going through the Old City on the way to the Western Wall. It looks like everyone is going out of their way to show that whatever is going on right now should not be brought into this local arena,” Heelan noted. “People are asking themselves: ‘Why go down with the ship? Why throw Jerusalem into the losing bargain?’ We hear so much divisive speech, often wrapped in religious language,” said Frimer. “With this event, we are using religious language, food and culture to say the opposite, to show that these things can bring people together instead of dividing them.”

However, according to Channel 12 news, “cardinal” differences remained over the deal. Most critically, Hamas continues to publicly insist on an Israeli commitment to end the war as a condition for hostage releases, a demand Israel has consistently dismissed.

Senior Israeli officials were quoted by Channel 12 news Tuesday as saying that Hamas was not interested in reaching an agreement.

Even though there’s not been a negative response, expectations should be lowered; Sinwar consistently drags his feet and opposes the deal,” an official told the network, referring to Hamas’s leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar.

If Hamas were to agree to a deal, a majority in the Israeli cabinet would likely approve it, Channel 12 news indicated, despite threats to withdraw support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by far-right members of the government who fear an end of the war on the horizon.

Channel 12 also reported Tuesday that Israel is insisting on 40 hostages being released amid Hamas claims it would not be able to free 40 living hostages who are women, children, older men or sick — meeting the so-called “humanitarian” designation of the first potential phase of a deal. The report noted that Hamas made the same claim during talks that produced a November weeklong truce that included the release of 105 hostages.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Tuesday that Hamas was presented with a “very serious offer” for a truce and hostage deal that “should be accepted.”

“Hamas could end all of this immediately and get a ceasefire that would benefit the people of Gaza and get the hostages homes. The fact that it continues to not say ‘yes’ is a reflection of what it really thinks about the people of Gaza, which is not much at all,” Blinken said at a Washington press conference with UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron.

Hamas “has an opportunity now to agree to the proposal on a ceasefire and hostages. The ball is in Hamas’s court. The world is watching to see what it does,” Blinken said.

“So much of the understandable outrage and anger is directed at Israel for the plight of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, but some of that might also need to be directed at Hamas. It is astounding to me that the world is almost deafeningly silent when it comes to Hamas.

We wouldn’t be where we are today had Hamas not chosen to engage in one of the most horrific acts of terrorism on October 7, and had they, having done that, not refused this many months to stop hiding behind civilians, put down their arms, release hostages and surrender. Where is the outrage there

Asked whether he agrees with the assessment made by Israeli-American hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin’s mother Rachel that the brokers have thus far failed, Blinken said, “Until the day that Hersh is home, we will have not succeeded.”

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said he spoke Tuesday morning with Qatar’s prime minister and urged him to secure an answer from Hamas to the latest hostage deal offer that was put forward over the weekend.

It is believed that 129 hostages are still held in Gaza of the 253 abducted on October 7, when thousands of Hamas-led terrorists burst across the border into Israel, killing some 1,200 people and committing wholesale atrocities, including sexual assault.Families of hostages called on members of the cabinet to “look them in the eyes” before making a decision, according to a statement from the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

“The cabinet is responsible for the lives of the hostages,” they chanted. “Time is running out, bring everyone back, nowWe learned that the prime minister [might be] delaying many chances to get a deal signed,” said protester Gil Dickmann, whose cousin Carmel Gat is held captive in Gaza. “Right now, we hear that there is a deal on the table.”

“We must make sure that we don’t lose this chance, or else we might get a ceasefire… without the return of the hostages. That’s our biggest fear right now.”

The group moved off the road and back onto sidewalks after a short while in response to police orders.

A small number of counter-protesters were situated nearby, calling on leaders not to “bend to Hamas.”

The legislation will send $17 billion in wartime assistance to Israel and $9 billion in humanitarian relief to citizens of Gaza and other war-torn regions — with Biden specifying at a White House event to announce the signing on Wednesday that the package “includes $1 billion for additional humanitarian aid in Gaza.”

Addressing the aid component for Israel, Biden noted that Iran launched an unprecedented direct missile and drone attack at Israel just days ago, but thanks to Israel’s defenses, “and other allies across the world, including from the region, no serious damage occurred

My commitment to Israel, I want to make clear again, is ironclad,” he stressed. “The security of Israel is critical. I will always make sure that Israel has what it needs to defend itself against Iran and terrorists it supports.”

The aid for Israel in the package, he said, “can help replenish Israel’s air defense and provide other critical defense so Iran can never carry out the destruction it intended with its attack 10 days ago.”

Biden also said Israel must ensure the aid for Palestinians in the bill reaches Gaza “without delay.”

He noted that the package “significantly increases humanitarian assistance we’re sending to the innocent people of Gaza, who are suffering badly. They’re suffering the consequences of this war that Hamas started. And we’ve been working intently for months to get as much aid to Gaza as possible.”

He said that the bill “includes $1 billion for additional humanitarian aid in Gaza. We’re going to immediately secure that aid and surge it — surge it, including food, medical supplies, clean water. And Israel must make sure all this aid reaches the Palestinians in Gaza without delay.”

Biden noted that “everything we do is guided by the ultimate goal of bringing these hostages [held by Hamas in Gaza] home, securing a ceasefire, and setting the conditions for an enduring peace.”

We rose to the moment, we came together, and we got it done,” Biden said. “Now we need to move fast, and we are

This is a call to our people in Jerusalem and the West Bank to march to Al-Aqsa on the first day of Ramadan,” Haniyeh said on February 28, apparently determined to give greater meaning to the terror group’s “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood,” the terror group’s name for its October 7 attacks on Israel.

Several days later, United States President Joe Biden told reporters, “There’s got to be a ceasefire, because [if] we get into a circumstance where this [war] continues through Ramadan…, Jerusalem… could [get] very, very dangerous.”Palestinians did flock to Al-Aqsa, certainly, with an average of 100,000 attending each of the four Ramadan Friday services. But they overwhelmingly did so in order to pray peacefully

During this war, we’ve seen Palestinian citizens of Israel voluntarily stay away from the Temple Mount until Ramadan,” Seidemann said, contrasting that with the May 2021 Gaza war, when tens of thousands of Arab Israelis were bussed to East Jerusalem in order to pray at Al-Aqsa and join the Palestinian nationalist scenes on the Temple Mount.

“Jerusalem has been quiet because the Palestinians in East Jerusalem decided they want quiet — that this is not the time,” Seidemann said.

“It’s important to mention their agency, because some are presenting them almost as if they’re objects. If we poke them in the wrong place, they’re going to explode — no,” he asserted.

Jerusalem expert acknowledged that “there is a great deal of sympathy with Hamas among Palestinians in East Jerusalem,” but argued there is “very little support, and there’s a difference between the two.”

An Israeli security official made a similar assessment, noting that security alerts were down on both sides of the Green Line during Ramadan.

“Palestinians might identify with Hamas’s struggle — partially because they’ve been shielded from seeing what it did on October 7 by networks like Al Jazeera — but even in the West Bank, where support for Hamas is higher, we haven’t seen Palestinians join the fight because very few want to pay the price those in Gaza are now paying,” the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

While Jewish visitors have in recent years increasingly been filmed praying at the site in violation of the fragile status quo there, “police held them on a tight leash this year, not allowing even the most minor provocations,” Seidemann, the Jerusalem expert, said, citing testimony from Palestinians at the Temple Mount.

There were allegations of excessive force by police against Palestinians around the Temple Mount on the first night of Ramadan, with reports of officers arbitrarily denying entry to Arab Israelis, which sparked scuffles.

“Had this persisted for another few days, there would have been an outbreak of violence,” Seidemann asserted, suggesting that Ben Gvir, whose ministry oversees the police, had been behind that night’s security preparations

An assist from Jordan

Seidemann said another factor in Jerusalem’s relative calm over Ramadan was the sermons from Muslim leaders at the Temple Mount “which were heated, but not incendiary.”

“It’s obviously Jordanian influence on the Waqf,” he asserted, referring to the Amman-backed religious trust that administers the holy site.

The Israeli security official agreed with the assessment, saying Jordan didn’t issue any statements of condemnation against Israel during Ramadan that Jerusalem felt were over the top

Jordan has the power to play a stabilizing force, and it chose to do that this time,” the security official said.

The official pointed to the Hashemite kingdom’s growing concerns over Hamas’s influence inside the country, which has been rocked by protests in favor of the terror group in recent weeks.

“They recognize that allowing incitement to violence at the Temple Mount will only provide more fuel to Hamas-backers inside Jordan,” the official said.

Just before the Holiday of Freedom, with 133 hostages, men and women, still being held deep in Hamas’s tunnels in Gaza, with no freedom and no hope, a support rally for the families of the hostages will be held,” organizers said, referring to the upcoming Passover holiday.

Recent weeks have seen an increasing convergence between the protests of the families and the mass anti-government demonstrations that were a weekly event in the months before October 7. Some of the families accuse Netanyahu of blocking a deal for political reasons. Negotiations via international mediators aim to reach a temporary ceasefire during which hostages would be released, but talks so far have not reached an agreement.

You are responsible for the abandonment of the hostages in Gaza,” she charged. “Because of you, Israeli women are being raped now in Gaza. Because of you, Israeli men are being tortured in Gaza. Because of you, hostages are being murdered in captivity. Yes, because of you

She added: “They could already have been at home, but you torpedoed the deal.”Speakers at the event cited what they called “testimonials” from two unnamed members of the Israeli hostage negotiating team, interviewed on Thursday’s Uvda investigative program, who were deeply critical of Netanyahu’s policies on the negotiations.

“Without Netanyahu, the chances of making a deal would be better,” one of the two negotiators told the program anonymously.

The families said the comments by those interviews showed “that Netanyahu is sabotaging the deal, just like we have been repeatedly saying.”Protesters chanted “shame” and booed Netanyahu’s name during speeches from hostage family members.

I dreamed about sitting with my brother at the Passover Seder table. Benjamin Netanyahu, you shattered this dream by blocking the deal from going through, out of your personal interests and empty slogans about total victory,” he said.

“The time for the hostages isn’t short, it has run out,” Hostages and Missing Families Forum organizer Tom Barkai said. “We know that they are dying there.”

“The responsibility has been on you for 190 days, and you aren’t taking the responsibility,” she continued.At the main anti-government rally a protest leader said Israel’s leadership “is making cynical use of the word ‘war,’ using it to say that ‘now is not the time’ to protest.” Anat Arbel, a criminologist and among the leaders of “The Pink Front,” one of the organizing groups of the weekly demonstration who is also an IDF reservist holding the rank of major, added that while she fights in Gaza, “this government is fighting us.”

Iranian media described the attack on Israel as “complex,” as it also involved Iranian allies in Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq.

“This attack did not come from Iran only, and this regime [Israel] is being punished from four directions,” the Tasnim news agency said

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVS) were reportedly launched by the Houthis toward Israel. The UAVs were launched in coordination with Iran,” the company said. “Israeli ports are assessed to be potential targets,” it added, and warned of “collateral damage” to shipping.

Additionally, drones were launched from Iraq, which IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said — like the UAVs from Yemen — failed to reach Israel.

In a statement on Sunday, Hezbollah praised Iran’s attack on Israel, describing it as a “brave” decision that initiated a “new phase” of the conflict with Israel and the Palestinian cause, while claiming Tehran exercised its legal rights, despite “threats, intimidation and pressure.”

The operation precisely achieved its limited military objectives, despite the involvement of the United States, its allies, and its regional tools in responding to the stunning attack,” Hezbollah said in a statement. “The long-term political and strategic objectives for this major development will be successfully apparent over time.”

The foreign minister of Syria, which is also part of the Iran-led “axis of resistance,” called Iran’s action against Israel a “legitimate act of self defense,” during a phone call Sunday with his Iranian counterpart, Syrian state media reported

Earlier in the day, the IDF said it struck a “significant weapons manufacturing site” belonging to Hezbollah in the Nabi Chit area, near northeastern Lebanon’s Baalbek, due to the Iran-backed terror group’s firing of some 40 rockets at northern Israel, during the overnight Iranian attack.

Fighting and mobilizing for the protection of all children is normal, it should be,” said Yessa Belkgodja, one of the organizers of the march, welcoming the court’s decision.

If we are banned from protesting, it means we don’t have the right to express ourselves in France… We are being monitored on social media. That’s enough, leave us alone,” said Yamina Ayad, a retiree who was wrapped in the Palestine flag.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would “land additional and painful blows” on Hamas over Passover to increase pressure on the terror group to free the hostages it has held in the Gaza Strip for over six months.

In a pre-Passover video message shared online, Netanyahu framed the Israel-Hamas war in biblical terms, citing the rabbinic dictum that “in every generation, they rise up to destroy us” and stating that the absence of the hostages over the upcoming holiday “only strengthens our determination to bring them back.” Unfortunately, until now, all proposals for the release of our hostages have been rejected outright by Hamas,” Netanyahu said, pushing back against growing domestic criticism that he has not done enough to secure their freedom.

Instead of retreating from its extreme positions, Hamas builds on division within us. It draws encouragement from the pressures directed at the Israeli government. As a result, it only tightens its conditions for the release of our hostages,” Netanyahu asserted. “Therefore, we will land additional and painful blows on it – and it will happen soon.”

“In the coming days, we will increase the military and diplomatic pressure on Hamas because this is the only way to free our hostages and achieve our victory,” he said.

Earlier this month, Netanyahu said that “there is a date” for the IDF’s long-delayed ground operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah but, according to CNN, he reportedly decided to delay the much-anticipated offensive after Iran’s recent missile and drone strike against the Jewish state.

Meanwhile, on Sunday, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi approved battle plans at the Southern Command headquarters in Beersheba, the military said.

The IDF said the “assessment of the situation and approval of plans for the continuation of the war” was attended by the head of the Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman and other officers.

US participants expressed concerns with various courses of action in Rafah,” the White House said. The comments were nearly identical to ones issued after an earlier virtual meeting on April 1.

However, Israel was said to have agreed to take Washington’s concerns into account and to hold a follow-up meeting soon, a US readout stated. No statement was issued by the Israeli side.

Protesters had agreed to remove some tents, restrict access to the protest zone to students, comply with fire safety codes and had “taken steps to make the encampment welcome to all and have prohibited discriminatory or harassing language,”

Without assurances of good faith bargaining and protections for nonviolent protestors against police and military violence, we will not be returning to the table,” read a statement posted on social media

In a letter addressed to “fellow members of the Columbia community,” hours earlier, Shafik said that she “fully support[s] the importance of free speech, respect the right to demonstrate, and recognize that many of the protestors have gathered peacefully

However, the encampment raises serious safety concerns, disrupts campus life, and has created a tense and at times hostile environment for many members of our community. It is essential that we move forward with a plan to dismantle it,” she added

According to Shafik, negotiations have been going on for several days. If the talks fail, she wrote “we will have to consider alternative options for clearing the [encampment] and restoring calm to campus so that students can complete the term and graduate.”We want to be visible,” said Columbia protest leader Mahmoud Khalil, who noted that students at the university have been pushing for divestment from Israel since 2002. “The university should do something about what we’re asking for, about the genocide that’s happening in Gaza. They should stop investing in this genocide.”

We are not afraid of you!” the protestors chanted before officers in riot gear pushed into them at the building’s entrance, video showed. Student Peyton McKinzie said she was walking on campus Monday when she saw police grabbing one woman by the hair, and another student having their head bandaged for an injury.

“I think a lot of students are in shock about it,”

There are no universities left in Gaza. So we chose to reclaim our university for the people of Palestine,” said Soph Askanase, a Jewish Columbia student who was arrested and suspended for protesting. “Antisemitism, Islamophobia and racism, in particular racism against Arabs and Palestinians, are all cut from the same cloth.”

Stop arming Israel,” “Stop funding genocide” and “Let Gaza live,” the crowd of some 2,000 chanted.

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“I don’t see what Israel is doing as self-defense. I see incredible, absolutely unbelievable human rights violations,” said Katherine Stern, 62, of Woodstock, New York, who gave up her family Seder 120 miles (190 kilometers) away to attend the Brooklyn protest.

Organizers staged music and songs from Jewish and other cultures, giving prominence to Canadian author Naomi Klein, a peace activist who drew on her Jewish roots to argue against Zionism, which she called a “false idol.”

“We want freedom from the project that connects genocide in our name,” Klein said to cheers. “We seek to migrate Judaism from an ethnostate that wants Jews to be perennially afraid… or that we go running to its fortress, or at least keep sending them the weapons and the donations.”

“So does defaming and endangering Jewish, Muslim and Palestinian… students based on suspiciously inflammatory remarks that a few unidentified, masked individuals have made outside of campus,” Afaf Nasher, executive director of CAIR in New York, said in a statement.

Other students blamed universities for failing to protect their right to protest or stand up for human rights.

“As a Palestinian student, I too did not feel safe for the past six months, and that was as a direct result of Columbia’s one-sided statements and inaction,” said Khalil, a Palestinian student at Columbia.

When you’re an Israeli student on this campus, you feel like you have a target on your back, you feel unsafe and it’s no wonder students from Israel are so hesitant to come here,” Zerman said

University of Michigan officials said that they have no direct investments with Israeli companies and that indirect investments made through funds amount to a fraction of 1% of the university’s $18 billion endowment. The school rejected calls for divestment, citing a nearly 20-year-old policy “that shields the university’s investments from political pressures.”

Twelve tents sporting slogans including “Free Gaza” or “No US $ For Israel” lined the entrance to the courtyard, with sleeping bags and pillows peeking out through the zippered doors.

Students sat cross-legged on the brick paving stones typing away on final papers and reading for exams. The semester ends in a couple of weeks.

“I would love to go home and have a shower,” said Owen Buxton, a film major, “but I will not leave until we reach our demands or I am dragged out by police

an experienced media adviser who had previously served as spokesman for former Yesh Atid MK Ofer Shelah and as a member of the party’s media team in four election campaigns — told his partner Roni: “I can no longer sit around.”

“The first thing I did was pick up the phone a few minutes after 8 a.m. and tell my clients that I had decided to take time off to help the hostages’ families,” Rubinstein told Zman Yisrael, The Times of Israel’s Hebrew-language sister site, in an interview this week.

Moshe told me something that still echoes in my ears, to this day,” Rubinstein recalls. “He told me, ‘We don’t need anything. They’ll be back within two days.’ I said I didn’t believe that would be the case.”

In the first meeting with the family members, some of them were in shock and had a hard time stomaching the fact that their kids had been kidnapped,” Rubinstein recalls. “I promised to get them anything they needed from an organizational perspective so that they could focus on the fight to get their children released quickly. People asked me all sorts of questions. For instance, one of the parents showed me a Hamas-issued video showing one of the hostages, but it was blurry and they had a hard time determining whether it was their daughter, so they wanted a professional to clean up the picture.”

Rubinstein resigned last month as the Forum’s spokesman. This is the first time since that he’s agreed to share his almost six-month-long experience – and to explain why he felt he had to leave the Forum that he had co-founded

As workers pulled down tents and bagged up the debris from the encampment, several dozen people across from the encampment chanted, “Let the Kids Go,” and slogans against the war in Gaza. They also booed as police cars passed and taunted the officers who stood guard over the encampment.

The school said in a statement that the demonstration, which began two days ago, had become “infiltrated by professional organizers” with no affiliation to the school and antisemitic slurs, including “kill the Jews,” had been used.

We cannot tolerate this kind of hate on our campus,” the statement posted on the social media

The Huskies for a Free Palestine student group disputed the university’s account, saying in a statement that counter-protesters were to blame for the slurs and no student protesters “repeated the disgusting hate speech.”

Students at the protest said a counter-protester attempted to instigate hate speech but insisted their event was peaceful and, like many across the country, was aimed at drawing attention to what they described as the “genocide” in Gaza and their university’s complicity in the war. The “harassing and intimidating comments and actions” by some protesters violate the school’s open expression guidelines as well as state and federal law, Jameson said, and vandalism of a statue with antisemitic graffiti was “especially reprehensible and will be investigated as a hate crime.”

A faculty group said Saturday that it was “deeply disturbed” by the university president’s email, saying it included “unsubstantiated allegations” that “have been disputed to us by faculty and students who have attended and observed the demonstration.

Also Friday, student protester Khymani James walked back comments made in an online video in January that recently received new attention. James said in the video that “Zionists don’t deserve to live” and people should be grateful James wasn’t killing them.

“What I said was wrong,” James said in a statement. “Every member of our community deserves to feel safe without qualification.”

The United Arab Emirates ambassador to the United Nations said on Monday that there must be an “irreversible progression” toward a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict before there is a regional commitment to the reconstruction of Gaza.

Lana Nusseibeh said there was “a very strong” Arab consensus that such progress was needed for any contributions towards reconstruction in Gaza once the war between Israel and the Palestinian terror group Hamas is over.

“We cannot keep refunding and then see everything that we have built destroyed,” she said at the World Government Summit in Dubai.Israel responded with a devastating military campaign aimed at topping the Hamas regime in Gaza and freeing the hostages

“There must be an irreversible progression to the two-state solution for regional partners to be on board with the reconstruction part… and that has to be something that has international guardrails and benchmarks and it has to have the support of the United States amongst other key actors,” Gulf states have historically helped with reconstruction after previous conflicts. Those bouts of fighting each began with Gaza rocket fire at Israel and the October 7 attack was also carried out under a barrage of thousands of rockets that terrorists rained on Israel.

However, the extent of destruction after four months of war in Gaza is unprecedented over decades of conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians, with more than 85 percent of the enclave’s population driven from their homes.

I won’t be surprised if Iran fires directly at Israel,” former Military Intelligence head Amos Yadlin told the network, explaining that a [January missile strike](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pakistan-iran-agree-to-de-escalate-after-trading-air-strikes/) carried out by Iran on neighboring Pakistan set a precedent for such action.

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The UAE is one of several Arab states that have established diplomatic ties with Israel over recent years in the Abraham Accords.

Nusseibeh’s remarks match the stance of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries on the need for clear progress towards a Palestinian state.

Last week, two senior [Arab nation diplomats](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-riyadh-arab-ministers-agree-to-advance-joint-plan-for-post-war-gaza-diplomats/) told The Times of Israel that top ministers from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority agreed at a [meeting](https://www.timesofisrael.com/riyadh-to-host-ministerial-confab-to-advance-united-arab-stance-for-post-war-gaza/) in Riyadh Thursday to move forward with plans to present a joint political vision for rehabilitating the Gaza Strip and establishing a Palestinian state after the Israel-Hamas war.

Several drafts of the plan have already begun circulating between the countries, though it is unclear when it will be unveiled.

The Thursday meeting — first reported by The Times of Israel — was held as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken concluded his fifth crisis tour of the Middle East since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war.

While Qatar is often left out of such discussions given its support for Islamist governments, the decision to include Doha is a recognition of its influence over Hamas, which participating countries believe is essential for postwar planning.

Most Arab countries that participated in the meeting don’t want Hamas to part of the political leadership of Gaza after the war, but they do believe that the terror group will manage to survive in some form and that a level of its acquiescence will be needed to successfully advance the rehabilitation of Gaza, a diplomat explained to The Times of Israel.

The united front that Israel’s Arab partners and potential allies are building is increasingly at odds with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, which expects the war to continue for many more months until “total victory” is secured. On the other hand, the grouping of Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia is offering Israel a partnership that could be used to more effectively combat Iran, which Netanyahu has long sought.

The vision that the Arab countries sought to promote during their Thursday meeting has been championed by the Biden administration for months, and Blinken again laid it out for Israelis during his visit to Tel Aviv on Wednesday.

“It will be up to Israelis to decide what they want to do… All that we can do is to show what the possibilities are… The alternative right now looks like an endless cycle of violence and destruction and despair. We know where the better path lies, but I don’t minimize in any way the very difficult decisions that would need to be made by all concerned to travel down that path,”

Turkey’s Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmet Yildiz tells judges at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that Israeli “occupation” of Palestinian territories is the root cause of conflict in the region.

“The unfolding situation after October 7 proves once again that, without addressing the root cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there can be no peace in the region,” he says on the sixth day of hearings.

“The real obstacle to peace is obvious. The deepening occupation by Israel of the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and failure to implement the two-state vision,”

Speaking a day before representatives of Hamas and the Fatah political faction dominating the PA were set to meet in Moscow for talks on forming a unified Palestinian government, Maliki downplayed their chances for success and told a press conference that a “technocratic” government was needed, without the Islamist terror group.

“The time now is not for a national coalition government,” Maliki said.

“The time now is not for a government where Hamas will be part of it, because, in this case, then it will be boycotted by a number of countries, as happened before,” he told the UN correspondents’ association.

“We don’t want to be in a situation like that. We want to be accepted and engaging fully with the international community,”

“Of course, we don’t expect miracles to happen in just a simple meeting in Moscow, but I believe that the meeting in Moscow should be followed by other meetings in the region soon,” Despite US backing for Israel’s goal of destroying Hamas, Maliki indicated that Fatah was still open to working together with the terror group.

“Later, when the situation is right, then we could contemplate that option. But what comes first is how to salvage the situation. How to salvage innocent Palestinian lives. How to stop this insane war and how to be able to protect Palestinian people,” he said.

“That’s why I think Hamas should understand this, and I do believe that they are in support of the idea to establish, today, a technocratic government.” “A government that is based on experts, individuals who are completely committed to take up the reins and the responsibility for this period — a difficult one — and to move the whole country into a period of transition into a stable kind of situation where, at the end, we might be able to think about elections… [that] will determine the type of government that will govern the state of Palestine later.”

[Analysts](https://www.timesofisrael.com/cosmetic-pa-reshuffle-seen-as-bid-by-abbas-to-hold-power-avoid-demanded-reforms/) have dismissed the PA government reshuffle as a bid by Abbas to preempt US demands for reforms aimed at “revitalizing” the Palestinian administration to allow it to take control of Gaza once fighting ends. Some have noted that the new government will remain under the thumb of Abbas, a deeply unpopular and aging leader who has refused to hold elections since 2009.

Speaking in Munich earlier this month, Shtayyeh said Fatah was ready to discuss bringing Hamas back into the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Palestinians’ official representative body, but only if it met certain conditions.

“In order for Hamas to be a member of the PLO, there have to be prerequisites that Hamas has to accept — the political platform of the PLO, an understanding on the issue of resistance and we are calling for popular resistance and nothing else,” he said.

Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad group say they seek a place in the PLO, but that it should be reformed to align with their rejection of Israel.

Israel has pointed to the possibility of PA-Hamas unity as a reason why the body cannot take control of Gaza once troops pull out.

If we want to move this two-state solution forward it will not happen from the parties. I do not believe that Israel is ready to negotiate at this point, and I do not think that the US is ready to take the necessary leadership,” Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide, one of the organizers of the meeting, told reporters after it concluded.

“So I think an Arab-European leadership is the best we can hope for.”

Borrell’s comments come amid a series of moves from European countries seeking to recognize Palestinian statehood. Earlier in April, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said his country would [recognize](https://www.timesofisrael.com/spain-to-recognize-palestinian-statehood-by-july-its-pm-says/) Palestinian statehood by July. Sanchez added that that he believed there would soon be a “critical mass” within the European Union to push several member states to adopt the same position, according to state news agency EFE

Malta, along with Slovenia and Ireland, was said by Sanchez at a March 22 European Council meeting to have agreed to “take the first steps” toward recognizing statehood declared by Palestinians in the Israeli-controlled West Bank and Gaza Strip. At the time, Sanchez said he expected the recognition to happen during the current four-year legislature, which began in 2023.

Israel subsequently accused the four countries of offering a “prize for terrorism” that would reduce the chances of a negotiated resolution to the Gaza conflict. In February, the Knesset voted to back Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s declaration opposing any “unilateral” recognition of a Palestinian state, as international calls grew for the revival of efforts to reach a two-state solution to the decades-long conflict.

Issued amid the ongoing war in Gaza, sparked by Hamas’s October 7 onslaught, the Israeli position states that any permanent accord with the Palestinians must be reached through direct negotiations between the sides and not by international dictates.

International calls intensified Friday for a probe into the deaths of dozens of Palestinians clamoring around an aid convoy in northern Gaza a day earlier, with many countries blaming Israel for the disaster and threatening diplomatic steps.

The calls came as officials involved in talks for a temporary ceasefire and prisoner swap expressed cautious optimism that such a deal could be struck before the start of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month, on March 10.

“We are hopeful that we can reach a cessation of hostilities and exchange of hostages. Everyone recognizes that we have a time limit to be successful before the start of Ramadan,” said Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in Turkey on Friday.

Family members of people held hostage in Gaza also expressed their hope a deal would be reached before Ramadan. Family members held a demonstration outside the US consulate in Tel Aviv on Friday demanding US President Joe Biden pressure the government to accept a deal.

“The [Biden] administration is more committed to the issue of the hostages than the Israeli government, therefore the families of the hostages, together with other activists, will call on the responsible adult to apply pressure and save the abductees from Hamas captivity and the extremist government,” Ynet quoted the organizers as saying. “These are critical days, a deal is on the table, Ramadan is approaching and every hour must be used to bring about an orderly solution.”

Negotiations could be complicated by Thursday’s mass-casualty incident, in which Hamas claimed over 100 people were killed.

Hamas blamed the IDF for the deaths, calling it a massacre, but the military has said most of the casualties were caused by a stampede and people being run over by the supply vehicles. Gunmen also opened fire in the area as they looted the supplies. The IDF said its fire was responsible for no more than 10 casualties

Hamas warned in a statement that the incident could lead to the failure of talks aimed at a deal on a truce and hostage release.

“The negotiations conducted by the movement’s leadership are not an open process at the expense of the blood of our people,” it said, referring to Thursday’s deaths and saying Israel would be responsible for any failure of the talks.

French President Emmanuel Macron voiced “deep indignation” and the “strongest condemnation of these shootings.” His foreign minister, Stephane Sejourne, said Paris would back an independent investigation sought by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that “the Israeli army must fully explain how the mass panic and shooting could have happened.”

The United States has also urged a thorough investigation, saying the incident shows the need for “expanded humanitarian aid to make its way into Gaza.” Nonetheless, the US [blocked](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-blocks-un-security-council-statement-blaming-israel-for-deadly-gaza-aid-stampede/) a UN Security Council resolution blaming Israel for the tragedy.

Meanwhile, South Africa said Friday that in the aid convoy incident, Israel had breached the World Court’s provisional orders in a legal case in which Pretoria has accused Israel of committing genocide in the coastal enclave.

“South Africa condemns the massacre of 112 Palestinians and the injury of hundreds more as they sought life-saving aid,” South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation said in a statement, relying on Hamas’s death count from the Gaza City incident.

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“This latest atrocity is another breach of international law and in breach of the binding provisional orders of the International Court of Justice.”

In response to the incident, Colombia’s leftist president, Gustavo Petro, announced that his country would cease all arms purchases from Israel, as he ramped up already-heated rhetoric employed by some Latin American leaders to describe Israel’s offensive in Gaza.

“Asking for food, more than 100 Palestinians were killed by (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu. This is called genocide and recalls the Holocaust,” Petro wrote on X. “The world must block Netanyahu. Colombia is suspending all arms purchases from Israel.”

Israel is one of the main providers of weapons to the South American country’s security forces, which are engaged in a decades-long conflict with leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug cartels.

Petro’s decision represents an escalation in the diplomatic spat between Israel and certain leftist leaders in Latin America, which began on February 18 when Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva likened Israel’s war in Gaza to the Holocaust.

Israel described the comments as a serious antisemitic attack and Holocaust denial and has demanded an apology; Brazilian sources have said that would not happen.

Petro, who along with Bolivian President Luis Acre [rallied](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/presidents-of-colombia-bolivia-back-brazils-lula-after-holocaust-comparison/) to Lula’s side in the spat, had voiced a similar sentiment in October, less than two weeks into the war,

President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, also took to X Friday to say that she was “deeply disturbed by images from Gaza,” adding that “[e]very effort must be made to investigate what happened and ensure transparency.”

Her colleague, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, had earlier expressed his dismay at the incident. “I am horrified by news of yet another carnage among civilians in Gaza desperate for humanitarian aid,” Borrell wrote on X. “These deaths are totally unacceptable.”

**Operations in Khan Younis**

Fighting continued Friday.

The IDF released footage of the Givati Brigade operating in the southern Gaza Strip, killing Hamas gunmen in eastern Khan Younis suburbs.

Over the past week, the IDF said Givati troops killed dozens of Hamas operatives during operations in the so-called Abasan area — named after the towns of Abasan al-Jadida, Abasan al-Kabira, and Abasan al-Saghira — some two kilometers from the Israeli border.

Ahead of the brigade’s operations, airstrikes were carried out against dozens of Hamas sites above and below ground, the IDF said.

In the town of Abasan al-Saghira, the IDF said troops located a hideout apartment used by Hamas, where weapons, including anti-tank missiles, drones, sniper rifles, assault rifles, grenades, RPGS and other equipment were stored.

“In the heart of the residential neighborhoods, the troops encountered dozens of terrorists and eliminated them with tank shelling, in close-quarters combat, and by directing airstrikes,” “During their interrogation, the terrorists provided intelligence information that went directly to the forces operating in Khan Younis,” Israel is making a concerted effort to head off feared plans by the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other top Israeli officials, an Israeli government source told The Times of Israel on Sunday.

The National Security Council is leading the campaign, according to the source.

The Foreign Ministry is also involved. “We are operating where we can,” said an Israeli diplomat.

The first source said the major focus of the feared ICC allegations will be that Israel “deliberately starved Palestinians in Gaza.”

Israel Defense Forces international spokesman Nadav Shoshani offered a rare briefing on Shabbat for foreign reporters about Israel’s support for the temporary humanitarian pier off Gaza, underscoring the country’s efforts to blunt the ICC campaign.

Writing for the Walla news site, analyst Ben Caspit said Netanyahu was “under unusual stress” over the prospect of an arrest warrant against him and other Israelis by the United Nations tribunal in The Hague, which would constitute a major deterioration in Israel’s international status.

Netanyahu was leading a “nonstop push over the telephone” to prevent an arrest warrant, focused especially on the administration of US President Joe Biden, Caspit reported.

Haaretz analyst Amos Harel reported that the Israeli government was working under the assumption that the ICC’s prosecutor, Karim Khan, may this week issue warrants for the arrest of Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi.

Amid the reports, Foreign Minister Israel Katz said Sunday that Israel “expects the court to refrain” from issuing arrest warrants.

“There is nothing more twisted than trying to prevent Israel from defending itself against a murderous enemy that openly calls for the destruction of Israel,” said Katz in a statement. “If the orders are issued, they will harm the commanders and soldiers of the IDF and give a boost to the terrorist organization Hamas and the radical Islamic axis led by Iran against which we are fighting.”

Katz stressed that Israel adheres to “all the laws of war,” and instructed Israel’s diplomatic missions around the world to prepare for a severe wave of antisemitism if the ICC issues arrest warrants.

Israel is not a member of the court, based in The Hague, and does not recognize its jurisdiction, but the Palestinian territories were admitted as a member state in 2015.

Netanyahu said on Friday that any decisions by the ICC would not affect Israel’s actions, but would set a dangerous precedent.

“Under my leadership, Israel will never accept any attempt by the International Criminal Court in The Hague to undermine its basic right to defend itself,” Netanyahu said in a statement on Telegram.

“While decisions made by the court in The Hague will not affect Israel’s actions, they will set a dangerous precedent that threatens soldiers and public figures,” he said.

One of Israel’s leading television news outlets, Channel 12, reported last week that Israel was increasingly worried by the possibility that the ICC would issue arrest warrants. The report said that the Prime Minister’s Office [held](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahus-office-hosts-emergency-talks-on-feared-icc-warrants-for-pm-ministers/) an “emergency discussion” on the issue. A government spokesperson did not respond to questions on the television report or its details.

Khan, the ICC prosecutor, said in October that the court had jurisdiction over any potential war crimes carried out by Hamas terrorists in Israel and by Israelis in the Gaza Strip.

Khan has said his team was investigating any crimes allegedly committed in Gaza, and that those found to have breached the law will be held accountable.

On October 7, Hamas led an attack on Israeli military bases and communities in which some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed and 253 were taken as hostages, according to Israeli tallies.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza claims that more than 34,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel in the war, but the number cannot be independently verified, and it is believed to include both Hamas terrorists and civilians, some of whom were killed as a consequence of the terror group’s own rocket misfires.

The IDF says it has killed over 13,000 terrorists in Gaza, in addition to some 1,000 who were killed inside Israel on and immediately following October 7.

The IDF has also lost 261 soldiers since it launched the ground invasion in late October, bringing the number of soldiers killed since October 7 to 604

The war, now in its seventh month, has displaced most of the blockaded Palestinian territory’s 2.3 million people and created a humanitarian crisis.

With 124 permanent members, the ICC can prosecute individuals for war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and aggression.

The investigation at the ICC is separate from the genocide case launched against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) also based in The Hague.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei fetes Hamas politburo leader Ismail Haniyeh for galvanizing world support for Palestinians and against Israel, crowing that the group’s propaganda has outshone Israel’s attempts to garner international backing, semi-official Iranian media reports.

“Despite the enemy’s wishes, it has turned Palestine to the world’s first issue,” Khamenei says, urging that further efforts be invested into building support for the terror group.

The theme is repeated in a separate meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

“Today, with the fierce resistance and standing of the oppressed and powerful people of Gaza, the issue of Palestine has gone beyond the Islamic world and has become the issue of the world of humanity. The people of the world hate the criminal Zionist regime and its main supporter, the United States, with all their heart. They love the oppressed people of Gaza,” Raisi is quoted saying by state-run media

Raisi also says Arab countries that normalized with Israel have been left with egg on their face, calling Israel’s war against Hamas the largest genocide in world history.

he Foreign Ministry on Monday charged that Hamas’s penetration of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees is so deep that “it is impossible to say where UNRWA ends and Hamas begins,” as a review of the organization’s links to terror was released.

The report [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/unrwa-review-israel-hasnt-provided-evidence-that-agency-staff-were-terror-group-members/) Israel had yet to provide supporting evidence for its claims that a significant number of UNRWA staff were members of terrorist organizations. It also asserted that UNRWA had “robust” policies in place to ensure staff neutrality, though acknowledged issues persist with compliance.

The review was led by former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna, who was appointed after Israel alleged that 12 UNRWA staff actively participated in the Hamas-led October 7 onslaught in which 1,200 people were killed and another 253 taken hostage, triggering the ongoing war in Gaza.

Israel subsequently claimed another 30 UNRWA staffers assisted or facilitated those crimes on October 7 and as much as 12 percent of the organization’s staff were affiliated with terror organizations.

“If more than 2,135 UNRWA employees are members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and 1/5 of the principals of UNRWA schools are Hamas activists, the problem with UNRWA-Gaza is not a problem of a few bad apples,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Oren Marmorstein said in a statement issued shortly before the report was released. “It is a poisoned and rotten tree whose roots are Hamas.”

The report “ignores the severity of the problem and offers cosmetic fixes,” said the Foreign Ministry.

“This is not what a true and comprehensive investigation looks like,” said the statement.

“This is what a desire to avoid the problem and not call it by its name looks like.”

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The ministry also said that UNRWA was not part of the solution for Gaza and never will be, and that donor nations should direct their funds to other humanitarian organizations.

Israel’s allegations against the dozen UNRWA staff led 16 states to pause or suspend funding of $450 million to UNRWA, a blow to an agency grappling with the humanitarian crisis that has swept Gaza since Israel launched its offensive there.

Israel has long complained about the agency, founded in 1949 to care for Palestinian refugees. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for UNRWA to be shut down, saying it is infested by terror elements and unjustly seeks to perpetrate the Palestinian refugee crisis.

UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini in March warned of “a deliberate and concerted campaign” to end its operations. UNRWA employs 32,000 people across its area of operations, 13,000 of them in Gaza.

A source close to Netanyahu said the premier “made it clear to Minister Gantz that the State of Israel only has one prime minister,” The source said the trip was organized without the prime minister’s approval and contrary to government regulations that require “every minister to clear travel in advance with the prime minister, including approval of the travel plan.

However, the Saturday statement from Gantz’s office confirmed the trip was going ahead and gave details on the upcoming meetings.

“Minister Gantz personally updated the prime minister on his own initiative on Friday of his intention to travel, in order to coordinate the messages to be transmitted in the meetings,”

Israel responded with a military campaign to topple the Hamas regime in Gaza, destroy the terror group, and free the hostages, over half of whom are still in captivity, among them over two dozen dead.

In the US, Gantz intends to advocate the legitimacy of the military operation in the Gaza Strip, and the promotion of a security arrangement in Lebanon as well as discuss efforts to reach a deal for the release of the hostages, according to his office.

He will also hold talks on preserving US aid to Israel and strengthening the strategic alliance between the two countries.

Gantz was also to travel to London from Washington. His political party is paying for the entire trip, Ynet reported.

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His visit to the US comes as the Biden administration has grown increasingly frustrated with Netanyahu and his government which is seen as beholden to its far-right members.

Biden said earlier this week that Israel was going to lose international support if it maintains its “incredibly conservative government.”

A White House official confirmed that Gantz will meet Harris and that the talks are expected to span topics including reducing Palestinian civilian casualties, securing a temporary ceasefire, the release of hostages held in Gaza, and increasing aid to the territory.

International mediators have been working for weeks to broker a deal to pause the fighting before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins March 10. A proposed framework on the table includes the release of about 40 hostages taken on October 7, among them women, children, elderly and ill abductees, and female soldiers in exchange for a six-week pause in fighting and the release of Palestinian security prisoners. Israel has mostly [accepted](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-says-israel-has-agreed-to-framework-for-gaza-truce-ball-is-in-hamass-court/) the framework and has slammed Hamas for its “delusional” demands that are holding up an agreement.

A White House official said Harris “will express her concern over the safety of the as many as 1.5 million people in Rafah,” the official said, adding that Israel also had a “right to defend itself in the face of continued Hamas terrorist threats.”

Israel is poised for a major offensive in the city of Rafah, the last major Hamas stronghold that has not yet been assaulted by Israel Defense Forces ground operation in Gaza. The city’s population has swollen with tens of thousands who fled from fighting in other areas of the Palestinian enclave raising international concerns for the safety of civilians if the IDF offensive goes ahead. The US has demanded that Israel ensure evacuation routes to safe areas for civilians.

Harris and Gantz will also discuss planning for after the war ends to revitalize Gaza under the Palestinian Authority, the White House official said. The US military on Saturday carried out its [first airdrop of humanitarian aid into Gaza](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-makes-first-gaza-aid-airdrop-says-delivery-contains-38000-meals/) and aid agencies warned of a growing humanitarian disaster in the Palestinian enclave as Israel pressed on with its offensive.

Plans for the US airdrop were announced by Biden on Friday, a day after dozens of Palestinians were killed in a dispute incident while preparing to receive humanitarian aid from a convoy of trucks in Gaza City. Israel says they were killed in a crowd crush and by trucks running them mover amid the chaos, while Hamas blames Israel for the deaths and accused Israeli troops of opening fire at the crowd. The incident drew renewed attention to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, as the war grinds on.

International pressure for a ceasefire has grown as the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry says that more than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war so far. The figures cannot be independently verified, and are believed to include both civilians and Hamas members killed in Gaza, including as a consequence of terror groups’ own rocket misfires.

The call was all the more notable coming from Schumer, the highest-ranking Jewish elected official in history and a man who is known for referencing the Hebrew root of his name — “shomer,” meaning guardian — to illustrate his commitment to Israel.

Schumer stressed that devotion in his speech as he castigated Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, as a man who is an “obstacle to peace” and who has “lost his way.” But while some Democratic and liberal groups applauded his speech, centrist groups — and even some of Netanyahu’s rivals — criticized it as inappropriate meddling in Israel’s internal affairs, and wondered aloud what he hoped to achieve.

Does Schumer feel his voice and bona fides are strong enough that Israeli officials will heed his call, especially given Netanyahu’s dismal poll numbers? Was his criticism of Netanyahu, as he said in the speech, mainly a reflection of how the “silent majority” of American Jews feel? Or was it a political maneuver to retain support among progressive Democrats who oppose Israel’s war and the Biden administration’s backing of it?

And could his broadside against Netanyahu in fact help the prime minister shore up his support — portraying himself as the only leader able to withstand American pressure?

n the speech on Thursday on the Senate floor, Schumer called for a two-state solution and defended Israel’s right to exist and fight against Hamas. Alongside Netanyahu, he condemned Hamas, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and far-right Israeli government ministers as “obstacles to peace.”

“Israel is a democracy,” Schumer said in the speech. “Five months into this conflict it is clear that Israelis need to take stock of the situation and ask, must we change course. At this critical juncture I believe a new election is the only way to allow for a healthy and open decision-making process about the future of Israel at a time when so many Israelis have lost their confidence in the vision and direction of their government.”

Schumer’s call for early elections in Israel — the current right-wing government took office at the end of 2022 — does reflect polling. The Israeli Democracy Institute said in a January poll that most Israelis — 71% — support accelerating elections. A series of polls since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7 have shown that Netanyahu would likely be unseated.

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But Gil Troy, a history professor at McGill University who has written extensively about Israel and Zionism, said Schumer misunderstood the Israeli call for early elections and “failed to read the Israeli room,” which broadly supports the war effort and opposes Schumer’s call for a two-state solution.

“Most Israelis, even those of us who like me have been calling for Netanyahu’s resignation for years, want a focused effective war effort and know that the two-state solution is not realistic at this moment,” Troy told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

He added that Schumer’s criticism actually plays into Netanyahu’s hands. “Those of us fed up with Netanyahu are furious at Schumer because Bibi’s base gets energized when the Americans — and the Israeli left — attack, especially in such a sloppy, uninformed, heavy-handed way,” Troy told JTA.

A range of organizations and figures — from the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC to the American Jewish Committee to [war cabinet minister] Benny Gantz, the Israeli official who is the likeliest candidate to unseat Netanyahu — said it was inappropriate for Schumer to call on an ally to hold elections and replace its leader. But Halie Soifer, who heads the Jewish Democratic Council of America, says Schumer’s speech wasn’t about Israelis as much as it was about speaking for American Jews.

She also suggested that Schumer was speaking to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, which has protested President Joe Biden’s support for Israel as he runs for reelection.

“I thought it was a powerful statement that reflected the way that the overwhelming majority of American Jews view both their deep commitment to Israeli security but also the challenges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” Soifer said. “It was not easy, [but] he clearly spoke from the heart and he addressed tough issues.” She added, “It doesn’t strike me as Senator Schumer’s intention to influence domestic politics. He was identifying the challenges facing US supporters of Israel in this moment. … There’s no way to talk about the challenges that Israel faces without speaking about the political challenges.”

In that vein, Phylisa Wisdom, the executive director of the liberal New York Jewish Agenda advocacy group, said she appreciated Schumer’s call for a two-state solution (something Biden has also repeatedly called for). She said Schumer, who represents New York, articulated “the set of nuanced views that most Jewish New Yorkers hold.”

She added, “This was a brave and historic address, and hopefully it continues to pave the way for the most urgent needs: the release of hostages, aid to Gaza, and a negotiated ceasefire all sides can agree to.”

But Times of Israel senior analyst Haviv Rettig Gur wrote, following the speech, that for those who seek change in Israel, Schumer’s speech hurt rather than helped.

“If you make him the hero standing up to American pressure on Israel/waffling on Hamas, you give him his one chance for political survival,” Gur posted on X. “The sooner Hamas is defeated, the sooner the election comes and the sooner Netanyahu almost certainly falls. … If Democrats don’t understand that, he’ll run circles around them.”

Some defenders of the speech felt that commentators were overstating Schumer’s aims. Former US ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, a Netanyahu critic, said Schumer’s call for elections was “calling for Israelis to decide.”

“What’s disrespectful about that?” Indyk tweeted. “Especially when most Israelis agree with Schumer that there should be new elections.”

Airdrops by the US and other countries are aimed at supplementing what officials say is an insufficient supply of aid being brought in by ground to Gaza, where the United Nations and associated aid agencies have warned that famine is “almost inevitable.”

“US Central Command and the Royal Jordanian Air Force conducted a combined humanitarian assistance airdrop into Northern Gaza on March 5, 2024, at 2:30 p.m. (Gaza time) to provide essential relief to civilians affected by the ongoing conflict,” the military command said in a statement Tuesday.

After Saturday’s airdrop focused on southern Gaza, Tuesday’s airdrop targeted northern Gaza, which has been largely cut off from humanitarian assistance as Israel seeks to prevent a resurgence of Hamas activity in areas that were once strongholds for the terror group.

“US C-130s dropped over 36,800 US and Jordanian meal equivalents in northern Gaza, an area of great need, allowing for civilian access to the critical aid,” CENTCOM said, adding that “we continue planning for follow-on aid delivery missions.”

The US has been working to get aid into Gaza through as many channels as possible, the State Department said Monday, describing the situation as “simply intolerable.”

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller told a daily briefing with reporters that Washington was “optimistic” about the potential of a maritime aid corridor to Gaza that it has been working on and US military’s airdrops were also set to continue. “Our goal is clear, to establish a comprehensive aid strategy that includes air, land and sea routes to maximize the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza and ensure that aid is distributed to everyone in Gaza who needs it,” Miller said.

Channel 13 reported Monday evening that humanitarian aid will enter Gaza from the sea in the coming days, for the first time since war’s outbreak following approval from Israel.

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The United Arab Emirates will finance the aid shipment from Cyprus where the aid will be subject to inspection by Israeli officials before it sails off to the Gaza coast.

The goal is for the shipment to arrive in Gaza before the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins around March 10, according to Channel 13, which citing anonymous Israeli officials.

The idea for a marine humanitarian corridor has been floated for years but never got off the ground due to Israeli reticence and concerns that the port in Gaza isn’t equipped to accept aid en masse.

The US made a renewed push for a marine humanitarian corridor to be established following last week’s deadly mass-casualty incident where dozens of Palestinians were killed trying to collect aid in northern Gaza, which has been largely cut off from humanitarian assistance.

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said during a Monday press briefing, “We’re exploring other channels to get aid into Gaza, including a maritime route. To that end, we’re looking at both military and commercial options to move assistance by sea.”

“There’s still an awful lot of work that’s being done on this to flesh it out. We’re also going to continue to urge Israel to facilitate more trucks and more routes opening up more crossings so that more aid can get in to people in need and [for the] flor to be increased,” he adds.

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“The maritime route can move more volume at sea, but it also is going to require a heavier logistics lift and some infrastructure… and is very much going to need the support of allies and partners,” he adds.

Israel has also said it is prepared to let in [more aid](https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-deadly-aid-incident-israel-to-try-new-methods-of-delivery-to-north-gaza-this-week/) to Gaza through the two checkpoints on the southern edge of the territory it has permitted to open, and has pointed the finger at the UN and other aid agencies for failing to distribute it more widely.

Israel, which checks all trucks entering Gaza from both crossings, has blamed the UN for not delivering the aid fast enough after they are cleared, and for leading to a general [fall-off in deliveries](https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-flow-of-aid-to-gaza-drys-up-un-blames-breakdown-of-law-and-order/) over the past month.

The UN has said it is becoming more difficult to distribute aid inside the enclave amid a breakdown of civil administration and law and order. The flow of aid from Egypt has almost dried up in the past two weeks, and a collapse in security has made it increasingly difficult to distribute the food that does get through, according to UN data and officials.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza drew renewed international attention last week’s deadly stampede in Gaza City.

Hamas claims at least 115 Palestinians were killed and hundreds more wounded on Thursday as they swarmed aid trucks that entered the city.

The terror group accused Israeli troops of shooting at the crowd of thousands, while the IDF says many of the casualties were trampled in a chaotic crush for the food aid, and that its troops only fired at a few individuals who rushed toward them in a threatening manner.

The United States, along with more than a dozen countries, suspended its funding to UNRWA in January after the allegations were raised, although several have since [resumed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/australia-to-resume-funding-for-unrwa-pledges-further-aid-for-gaza/) payments.

The panel’s interim report found “that UNRWA has in place a significant number of mechanisms and procedures to ensure compliance with the Humanitarian Principle of neutrality, and the group has also identified critical areas that still need to be addressed,” according to a statement from Guterres’s spokesman Wednesday, which didn’t specify the areas in need of fixes.

“The review group will now develop concrete and realistic recommendations on how to address these critical areas to strengthen and improve UNRWA,” the statement added.

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The review group is led by former French foreign affairs minister Catherine Colonna, and the panel worked with three research institutes — Sweden’s Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Norway’s Chr. Michelsen Institute and Denmark’s Institute for Human Rights.

Colonna interviewed UNRWA staff as well as Israeli and Palestinian officials as part of the investigation.

Israel has long pushed for UNRWA’s closure, arguing that it helps perpetuate the conflict with the Palestinians since it confers refugee status upon descendants of those originally displaced around the time of Israel’s War of Independence, unlike other refugee groups around the world.

The agency has also been found to employ antisemitic staffers and use textbooks Israel deemed antisemitic and inciteful.

**US funding halt to continue until March 2025**

An agreement reached by US congressional leaders and the White House on a massive bill funding programs in the military, State Department and a range of other areas will continue a ban on US funding for UNRWA until March 2025, two sources said on Tuesday.

The US Senate passed legislation last month cutting off funding for the agency, part of a $95 billion bill providing aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan that has stalled in the House of Representatives.

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Backers of the aid have been trying to get it restored, calling on Washington to support the relief body as aid groups work to ward off famine in Gaza.

The two sources familiar with the agreement said the funding would be blocked for a year, and that details of alternative efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza would be discussed after the legislation is made public.

The White House and congressional leaders declined to comment on details of the agreement until texts of the spending bills are released.

**Protests against agency**

On Wednesday, a few dozen Israelis protested outside the Jerusalem office of the agency, calling for its dismantling over its alleged ties to Hamas.

“UNRWA has allowed terrorism,” said American-Israeli protester Allison Epstein. “It is not an organization for peace. It has taught generations of Palestinians to hate Jews. It’s time to dismantle it.”

Around her in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, protesters chanted: “UNRWA is Hamas! Hamas is UNRWA!”

Washington has said that UNRWA has an “absolutely indispensable role” to play in distributing aid in Gaza, where Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said the “entire population” is suffering “severe levels of acute food insecurity.”

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini [complained](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-rejects-un-aid-agency-chiefs-claim-he-was-blocked-from-entering-gaza/) this week that he was blocked from entering Gaza after Israel said he had not followed proper procedures for coordinating his visit.

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EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell joined calls urging Israel to allow him in.

UNRWA “is playing an indispensable role in bringing relief to the afflicted civilian population in Gaza,” Borrell said in a social media message that also urged Israel to grant visas to other humanitarian workers.

COGAT, the Israeli defense ministry body governing civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, said on X that Lazzarini had not followed “the necessary coordination processes and channels” when requesting entry into Gaza.

US Vice President Kamala Harris drew a distinction between Israelis and their government in a TV interview on Friday, saying the two should not be conflated.

Israelis deserve security and the United States will continue to “stand for the security of Israel and its people,” Harris told CBS, when asked whether Jerusalem was at risk of losing support from Washington over its management of the war in Gaza, triggered by Hamas’s October 7 massacre in Israel.

Pointing to the Hamas onslaught, Harris specifically mentioned Israeli victims who were “horribly abused and raped, rape being a tool of war,” days after a [UN expert report](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-finds-evidence-of-rape-on-oct-7-and-after-israel-they-tried-to-downplay-issue/) presented evidence of systematic sexual violence crimes by terrorists during the brutal October 7 killing spree.

“It’s important for us to distinguish or at least not conflate the Israeli government with the Israeli people. The Israeli people are entitled to security – as are the Palestinians. In equal measure,” she said in the [interview with CBS News](https://www.cbsnews.com/video/vice-president-harris-on-israel-immigration-tiktok-more/).

“And our work as always as the United States is to do what we must, and what we always have, to stand for the security of Israel and its people, and also to do what we have done behind closed doors and in public around forcing a better path forward in terms of what’s happening currently in Gaza.”

Her comments reflected the increasing public friction between the White House and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s hard-line coalition amid the Israel-Hamas war, with President Joe Biden having [warned](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-to-survive-israel-must-take-opportunity-for-peace-security-with-palestinians/) 10 days earlier that if Israel continued with the “incredibly conservative government they have, and [far-right National Security Minister Itamar] Ben Gvir and others… they’re going to lose support from around the world. And that is not in Israel’s interest.”

The question on support for Israel came after Biden was [caught](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-caught-on-hot-mic-i-told-bibi-were-going-to-have-a-come-to-jesus-meeting/) on a hot mic Thursday saying that he and Netanyahu would need to have a “come to Jesus” meeting — an American expression for having a blunt conversation — on growing humanitarian concerns in Gaza.

The war in Gaza erupted after Hamas’s brutal October 7 attack, which saw thousands of terrorists burst into Israel by land, air and sea, killing some 1,200 people and kidnapping another 253 to Gaza, mostly civilians; 130 hostages are still in Hamas captivity.

In response, Israel declared war on Hamas and vowed to destroy the Palestinian terror group, to return the hostages — over half of whom remain in captivity — and to exercise caution to protect Palestinian civilians who, according to defense officials, are used as human shields by Hamas terrorists deeply entrenched inside Gaza’s civilian fabric.

The climbing death toll, estimated by Hamas-run health officials at over 30,000 — a figure that does not differentiate between civilians and combatants, cannot be independently verified, and according to Israel includes some 13,000 Hamas terrorists killed in battle — has tested US tolerance for Israel’s offensive. Israel also says it killed some 1,000 gunmen inside Israel on October 7.

The “humanitarian catastrophe,” as described by Harris, in Gaza has also been a point of contention between Jerusalem and Washington.

The United Nations estimates that 2.2 million people — the vast majority of Gaza’s population — are at risk of famine, particularly in the north where destruction, fighting and looting make the delivery of food almost impossible.

Asked if she was losing confidence in Netanyahu, Harris responded: “This conflict has to end as soon as possible, and how it does so matters. We need to get the hostages out, we need humanitarian aid to go in and ultimately we need a two-state solution.”She reiterated calls for a temporary ceasefire deal that was in discussions in Cairo over the past week, which senior US officials have [accused](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-says-hamas-holding-up-6-week-ceasefire-by-refusing-to-release-vulnerable-hostages/) Hamas of holding up.

“We need this ceasefire over the course of at least six weeks to be able to facilitate support getting in for these innocent civilians who so desperately need it,” the US vice president said, echoing [remarks she made Sunday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/calling-for-ceasefire-us-vp-harris-says-israel-not-doing-enough-to-get-aid-to-gazans/) and during a [meeting](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hosting-gantz-harris-balances-praise-of-israel-with-criticism-over-gaza-aid-crisis/) with visiting war cabinet minister Benny Gantz on Monday.

Harris was one of several top US officials who met with Gantz during a visit seen as partially aimed at smoothing over bubbling Israel-US tensions. Her comments underlined intense frustration within the US government about the war, which has hurt Biden with left-leaning voters as he seeks re-election this year.

“People in Gaza are starving. The conditions are inhumane and our common humanity compels us to act,” Harris said Sunday at an event to commemorate the 59th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” in Alabama. “Our hearts break for… all the innocent people in Gaza who are suffering from what is clearly a humanitarian catastrophe.”

Those remarks appeared to be the sharpest rebuke yet by a senior leader in the US government over the conditions in the coastal enclave.

“The Israeli government must do more to significantly increase the flow of aid. No excuses,” she said. “They must not impose any unnecessary restrictions on the delivery of aid.”

In his State of the Union address on Thursday evening, Biden [defended](https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-in-sotu-pledges-to-free-hostages-warns-israel-against-using-aid-as-bargaining-chip/) Israel’s right to pursue Hamas after the terror group’s October 7 terror onslaught, while expressing his dissatisfaction with the humanitarian toll in the ensuing war.

“To the leadership of Israel, I say this: humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip. Protecting and saving innocent lives has to be a priority,” Biden said, as Washington continued to stiffen its tone with Israel while maintaining its overall support for Israel.

During its closed-door meeting “there was no consensus,” said Maltese Ambassador Vanessa Frazier, who holds the council’s rotating presidency for April. However, two-thirds of the members were in favor of full membership, she said, without specifying which countries.

Washington maintains the United Nations is not the place for hashing out Palestinian statehood, which it stresses should be the result of an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

“All we ask for is to take our rightful place among the community of nations,” Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour told reporters earlier this week.

Israel has lambasted an interim report reviewing allegations against Palestinian refugee agency UNRWA as attempting to “cover up” the body’s failures and its ties to terror organizations in order to allow for it to resume receipt of global funding.

The report, commissioned by the UN and produced by an independent team headed up by former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna, [found that](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-finds-unrwa-has-mechanisms-ensuring-neutrality-critical-areas-require-action/) the agency has mechanisms in place to ensure its neutrality, but also deficiencies that must be addressed.

The review group was established following Israeli allegations in late January that 12 of UNRWA’s employees [actively participated](https://www.timesofisrael.com/unrwa-sacks-staffers-who-allegedly-participated-in-oct-7-attack-us-halts-funding/) in Hamas’s October 7 terror onslaught on southern communities, when terrorists murdered some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took 253 hostages to Gaza. Israel argues that Hamas’s infiltration into the agency runs far deeper and that [some 1,500 employees](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-reveals-12-unrwa-staffers-it-says-took-part-in-oct-7-says-30-more-assisted/) (some 10%) have active ties to terror groups.

A statement from the Foreign Ministry released on Saturday, 10 days after the independent review group issued its interim findings, said the report ignores the severe accusations against UNRWA and offers only suggestions for “cosmetic” reforms to the Palestinian refugee agency.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Lior Haiat excoriated the report for “not even” including a “simple statement that UNRWA should fire or refrain from employing members of Hamas and other terrorist organizations.”

“All the proposals for cosmetic reforms offered by the group are meaningless and ignore the real problem that UNRWA is part of the terrorist infrastructure of Hamas,” Haiat added, saying that the report’s conclusions “are another stain on the United Nations and the UN secretary-general.

“Israel calls on the donor countries not to allow their taxpayers’ money to flow through UNRWA to terrorist organizations, and to divert this funding to other humanitarian organizations in Gaza,” the statement concluded.

Following Israel’s bombshell allegations against the agency — which Jerusalem has long accused of helping perpetuate the ongoing conflict — a number of countries, including the US, suspended funding to the organization.

In recent weeks, as hunger in Gaza has grown more acute amid difficulties in the distribution of humanitarian aid, a number of countries have resumed funding to UNRWA, which has the most established infrastructure in the Strip, including [France](https://www.timesofisrael.com/france-to-resume-unrwa-funding-while-ensuring-right-conditions-are-met/), Canada and Australia.

The panel’s interim report found “that UNRWA has in place a significant number of mechanisms and procedures to ensure compliance with the Humanitarian Principle of neutrality, and the group has also identified critical areas that still need to be addressed,” according to a statement from Guterres’s spokesman earlier this month, which didn’t specify the areas in need of fixes. Israel has long pushed for UNRWA’s closure, arguing that it helps perpetuate the conflict with the Palestinians since it confers refugee status upon descendants of those originally displaced around the time of Israel’s War of Independence, unlike other refugee groups around the world.

The agency has also been found to employ antisemitic staffers and use textbooks at its schools Israel deemed antisemitic and inciteful.

An independent review published Monday of the beleaguered UN agency for Palestinian refugees said that Israel had yet to provide supporting evidence for its claims that a significant number of agency staff were members of terrorist organizations and argued that UNRWA had “robust” policies in place to ensure staff neutrality.

Israel rejected the findings, saying it only provided “cosmetic fixes,” reasserting its position that the agency was intertwined with Hamas and could not play a future role in Gaza. A prominent UN watchdog also called the report a “whitewash.”

The United Nations appointed former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna to lead the UNRWA neutrality review in February after Israel alleged that 12 UNRWA staff actively participated in the Hamas-led October 7 onslaught in which 1,200 people were killed and another 253 taken hostage.

The assault on southern Israel triggered Israel’s war against the terror group in Gaza.

Israel subsequently claimed another 30 UNRWA staffers assisted or facilitated those crimes on October 7 and as much as 12 percent of the organization’s staff were affiliated with terror organizations.

The Colonna-led review’s final report determined that UNRWA has robust frameworks in place to ensure compliance with humanitarian neutrality principles, though issues persist. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres didn’t wait until the formal release, issuing a statement Monday morning declaring that he accepted the panel’s recommendations and calling on all countries to actively support UNRWA as it is “a lifeline for Palestine refugees in the region.”

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From 2017 to 2022, the report said the annual number of allegations of neutrality being breached at UNRWA ranged from 7 to 55. But between January 2022 and February 2024 UN investigators received 151 allegations, most related to social media posts “made public by external sources,” it said.

In a key section on the neutrality of staff, the panel said UNRWA shares lists of staff with host countries for its 32,000 staff, including about 13,000 in Gaza. But it said Israeli officials never expressed concern and informed panel members it did not consider the list “a screening or vetting process” but rather a procedure to register diplomats.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry informed the panel that until March 2024 the staff lists did not include Palestinian identification numbers, the report said.

Apparently based on those numbers, “Israel made public claims that a significant number of UNRWA employees are members of terrorist organizations,” the panel said. “However, Israel has yet to provide supporting evidence of this.”

Israel’s allegations against the dozen UNRWA staff led 16 states to pause or suspend funding of $450 million to UNRWA, a blow to an agency grappling with the humanitarian crisis that has swept Gaza since Israel launched its offensive there.

Israel has long complained about the agency, founded in 1949 to care for Palestinian refugees. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for UNRWA to be shut down, saying it is infested by terror elements and unjustly seeks to perpetrate Palestinian refugee crisis.

UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini in March warned of “a deliberate and concerted campaign” to end its operations.

UNRWA says it terminated the contracts of 10 of the 12 staff accused by Israel of involvement in the October 7 attack, and that the other two are dead.

UNRWA employs 32,000 people across its area of operations, 13,000 of them in Gaza.

**Political views, textbooks**

UNRWA shares staff lists annually with Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Israel, the review said.

It noted that UNRWA has “a more developed approach” to neutrality than other similar UN or aid groups. “Despite this robust framework, neutrality-related issues persist,” it found.

It said these included some staff publicly expressing political views, textbooks with problematic content being used in some UNRWA schools, and politicized staff unions making threats against UNRWA management and disrupting operations.

In Gaza, UNRWA’s neutrality challenges included the size of the operation, with most personnel being locally recruited and also recipients of UNRWA services, the review said. Gaza had been under tight Hamas rule since 2007.

Some states had resumed UNRWA funding but had requested “a reinforcement of UNRWA’s existing neutrality mechanisms and procedures, including staff vetting and oversight.”

The report recommended establishing “a continuous vetting process, especially in the event of staff promotion.”

It called UNRWA “irreplaceable and indispensable to Palestinians’ human and economic development.”

Following the Israeli allegations against UNRWA staff, the United States, UNRWA’s biggest donor at $300-400 million a year, paused funding, then the US Congress suspended contributions until at least March 2025.

**‘This isn’t a problem a few bad apples’**

Responding to the review, the Foreign Ministry said that Hamas’s penetration of the UN agency is so deep that “it is impossible to say where UNRWA ends and Hamas begins.”

“If more than 2,135 UNRWA employees are members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and 1/5 of the principals of UNRWA schools are Hamas activists, the problem with UNRWA-Gaza is not a problem of a few bad apples,” the Foreign Ministry said in a statement, rejecting the review’s conclusions. “It is a poisoned and rotten tree whose roots are Hamas.”

The report “ignores the severity of the problem and offers cosmetic fixes,” charged the Foreign Ministry.

“This is not what a true and comprehensive investigation looks like,” said the statement. “This is what a desire to avoid the problem and not call it by its name looks like.”

A prominent pro-Israel lobbying group at the United Nations, UN Watch, also lambasted the report, calling it a “whitewash.”

UN Watch chief Hillel Neuer said that the Colonna report was “a complete whitewash, ignoring hundreds of pages and thousands of screenshots and videos in our submission to the probe, which contained evidence of widespread promotion of terrorism by UNRWA staff, and its systemic refusal to stop it.”

UN Watch also noted that Colonna’s goal at the start of the probe was not to find the truth, but to “reassure donors.”

Israel has asserted that UNRWA is not part of the solution for Gaza and never will be, and that donor nations should direct their funds to other humanitarian organizations.

In February, a video aired from October 7 showed two men, including an individual identified as UNRWA social worker Faisal Ali Mussalem al-Naami outside Kibbutz Be’eri, taking the body of Jonathan Samerano, who was murdered by terrorists, and placing it in an SUV to take back to Gaza.

n further damning revelations, IDF forces found in February a subterranean data center — complete with an electrical room, industrial battery power banks and living quarters for Hamas terrorists operating the computer servers — underneath UNRWA’s headquarters in Gaza City.

Numerous past reports have found that UNRWA schools and teachers continue to teach hatred of Jews and glorify terrorism, including a 2022 report by the IMPACT-SE organization that UNRWA textbooks continue to contain incitement. A 2023 report by the same organization along with the UN Watch group cited dozens of examples of social media posts by UNRWA employees that “glorify terrorism, encourage martyrdom, demonize Israelis and incite antisemitism.”

The review was led by Colonna and conducted in collaboration with three research organizations: the Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Sweden; the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Norway; and the Danish Institute for Human Rights, all of which have been accused by the pro-Israel UN Watch organization of seeking to exonerate UNRWA in order to preserve its international funding.

Citing “widespread starvation” in Gaza, South Africa on Wednesday urged the United Nations’ top court to order Israel to allow humanitarian aid into the war-torn region as part of an ongoing case alleging that Israel’s military campaign in Gaza breaches the Genocide Convention.

South Africa — which filed the genocide case against Israel late last year — approached the International Court of Justice again on Wednesday and said it was compelled to seek more preliminary orders “in light of the new facts and changes in the situation in Gaza — particularly the situation of widespread starvation — brought about by the continuing egregious breaches” of the convention by Israel.

While aid groups say all of Gaza is mired in a humanitarian crisis, the situation in the largely isolated north stands out. Many of the estimated 300,000 people still living there have been reduced to eating animal fodder to survive, according to some accounts. The UN says that one in six children under the age of two in the north suffers from acute malnutrition.

“South Africa respectfully calls on this Court to act again now — before it is too late — to do what is within its power to save Palestinians in Gaza from genocidal starvation,” South Africa said in a written request.

It is the second petition South Africa has made to the court, seeking motions against Israel, in less than a month. In mid-February, South Africa requested urgent measures to safeguard southern Gaza’s Rafah amid Israeli plans for a campaign in the city, Hamas’s last bastion in the enclave. That request was [denied](https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-un-court-rejects-south-african-request-for-urgent-measures-to-safeguard-rafah/).

At hearings in January, lawyers for Israel argued that its war in Gaza was a legitimate defense of its people and that it was Hamas who was guilty of genocide.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry had no immediate comment Wednesday night to South Africa’s latest request.

Israel has strongly denied breaching the Genocide Convention and, together with its Western allies, has rejected the allegation as baseless. It has asserted its right to self-defense following Hamas’s October 7 shock attack, which sparked the war, and says it does all it can to spare civilians while targeting Hamas terrorists in Gaza. It says Hamas’s tactics of deliberate embedding in civilian areas and institutions make it more difficult to avoid civilian casualties.

The ICJ [ruled](https://www.timesofisrael.com/icj-tells-israel-to-prevent-genocide-in-gaza-rejects-ordering-immediate-ceasefire/) in late January that there was “plausibility” to South Africa’s claims that Palestinians require protection from genocide but stopped short of ordering an immediate, unilateral ceasefire.

The order clarified that the decision was not a determination on the merits of South Africa’s allegations — which may take years to get through the judicial process — and asked Israel to [report to the court](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-reports-to-icj-on-actions-taken-to-comply-with-court-orders-on-gaza/) short-term, detailing the measures it has and is taking to comply. The ICJ asked Israel to prevent actions in the Gaza war that could violate clauses of the Genocide Convention and ordered regular updates. Israel’s report was not made public.

On Wednesday, South Africa accused Israel of violating the provisional measures imposed by the court including that Israel immediately enable urgently needed services to address starvation and other issues. It called on judges to make orders without first holding a hearing, due to the “extreme urgency of the situation.”

The delivery of aid to Gaza has been a central issue in the ongoing war. Israel, which checks all trucks entering Gaza from both the Kerem Shalom and Rafah crossings, has blamed the United Nations for not delivering the aid fast enough after they are cleared, and for leading to a general fall-off in deliveries over the past month.

In its request Wednesday, South Africa also again urged the court to order “all participants in the conflict” to “ensure that all fighting and hostilities come to an immediate halt, and that all hostages and detainees are released immediately.”

In an attempt to further ratchet up international pressure on Israel, South Africa also asked the court to order all countries that have ratified the convention to “refrain from any action, and in particular any armed action or support thereof, which might prejudice the right of the Palestinians in Gaza to be protected from acts of genocide.”

Independent US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. offered staunch support for Israel in a Reuters interview, calling it a “moral nation” that was justly responding to Hamas provocations with its attacks on Gaza and questioning the need for a six-week ceasefire backed by President Joe Biden.

Biden has also been a vocal defender of Israel since the October 7 attack by Hamas, but he has recently pressured the country to stem the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and accelerate a six-week ceasefire for hostage releases and aid delivery.

Asked if he supported a temporary ceasefire in Gaza, Kennedy told Reuters: “I don’t even know what that means right now.”

Kennedy said that each previous ceasefire “has been used by Hamas to rearm, to rebuild and then launch another surprise attack. So what would be different this time?” he said.

Kennedy, 70, spoke to Reuters in a wide-ranging interview on Monday from his office at his Spanish-style home in Los Angeles, hidden by tropical plants and hedges.

Support for Israel has become a political wedge issue inside the Democratic Party, as the death toll in Gaza tops 30,000, per Hamas health authorities, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vows to push an assault into Rafah.

Kennedy’s policy proposals, including a pledge to make homeownership easier and crack down on corporate subsidies, have gained some traction among US voters unenthusiastic about Biden, a Democrat, or his Republican rival Donald Trump in the presidential election.

Speaking from an office crammed with bookshelves, taxidermied animals and insect specimens, Kennedy told Reuters he sees wars as either moral crusades that should be pursued or wars of choice that should be avoided.

“World War I was an immoral war. It was a war of choice. We should have never gone,” he said.

Israel did not choose this war, he said, comparing it to US involvement in World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Kennedy said Hamas was to blame for Gaza’s destruction for failing to embrace a two-state solution and for firing thousands of missiles into Israeli cities like Tel Aviv.

Any other nation that was adjacent to a neighboring nation that was bombing it with rockets, sending commandos over to murder its citizens, pledging itself to murder every person in that nation and annihilate it, would go and level it with aerial bombardment,” Kennedy said.

“But Israel is a moral nation. So it didn’t do that. Instead, it built an Iron Dome to protect itself so it would not have to go into Gaza.”

He said Hamas gave Israeli leaders no choice after terrorists stormed into Israel on October 7, killing 1,200 people and capturing 253 hostages, according to Israeli tallies.

“I intend to beat him in this election. I want to beat him on a level playing field. I don’t want to beat him because of a court case,” he said.

Kennedy said he considered many subsidies in the IRA “absolutely catastrophic for the environment.”

“You know, virtually all the carbon capture subsidies are really giant subsidies to the oil industry and to the carbon industry. We should not be doing that. We shouldn’t add to big agriculture… I would get rid of those altogether,” he said.

He spoke in front of a taxidermied tiger that was a gift to his late father from Indonesia’s late President Sukarno. On his bookshelves were skulls of various animals, dead spiders in vials and a stream of wooden ducks, some antique and some passed down from his father, the senator and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy who was assassinated in 1968.

The bookshelves featured photograph archives of his uncle, former president John F. Kennedy, as well as books about the US Central Intelligence Agency, and classics like Lewis Carroll’s “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.”

His comments on COVID-19 and the vaccine have sometimes strayed into areas that have invited charges of antisemitism, such as in July, when he [floated a conspiracy](https://www.timesofisrael.com/rfk-jr-suggests-covid-19-was-ethnically-targeted-to-avoid-ashkenazi-jews/) in July that the COVID-19 virus was “ethnically targeted” to mostly spare Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people.

He has previously apologized for using the word “holocaust” to describe legislation mandating vaccines for children and for invoking Anne Frank at an anti-vaccine rally. He has also walked back praise of Roger Waters, the former Pink Floyd frontman and vehement critic of Israel who has been widely slammed for using Holocaust imagery during his concerts.

Kennedy has denied being antisemitic, calling the charge “one that cuts me.”

Reuters/Ipsos polls show Kennedy backed by 16% of respondents aged 18 through 39, versus 28% for Biden and 26% for Trump.

Fifteen percent of respondents aged 40 or older said they supported Kennedy Jr., versus 33% for Biden and 36% for Trump.

“I’m not concerned about whether people disagree with me,” Kennedy said in response to a question on how his position on Gaza might affect his standing among young voters.

“If somebody shows me that I’m wrong about an issue, I’m going to change my opinion.”

 When the leader of Ireland appeared alongside US President Joe Biden on St. Patrick’s Day, he spent about half of his speech advocating for a ceasefire in Gaza. But before he made his case, he explained why the issue hit so close to home.

“When I travel the world, leaders often ask me why the Irish have such empathy for the Palestinian people,” Leo Varadkar, the Irish taoiseach, or prime minister, said Sunday at the White House. “And the answer is simple: We see our history in their eyes — a story of displacement, of dispossession and national identity questioned and denied, forced emigration, discrimination and now hunger.”

If Biden, an Irish-American who loves to celebrate his ancestral homeland, was hoping for some Irish cheer at the event, Varadkar was not the one to deliver.

The Taoiseach said he “supports” the president’s push for a humanitarian ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war, and called for the release of Israeli hostages. But Varadkar went further in criticizing Israel than Biden has, calling on its “bombs to stop.” He added that “Israel must reverse its precipitous decision to authorize a land incursion into Rafah,” the city in southern Gaza that Israel says it must enter in order to defeat Hamas, but which now contains more than 1 million civilians.

And before the meeting with Biden, he directed criticism directly at the president, who has largely supported Israel’s war effort despite some criticism. When a reporter asked Varadkar about American weapons shipments to Israel, Varadkar said, “That’s something we don’t agree with, but the American government is a sovereign government that makes its own decisions.”

Its mission to the United Nations said a Security Council Resolution calling for faster delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza did not go far enough, and instead called for “an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, in line with the overwhelming view of the international community.”

Some of Ireland’s most prominent artists have joined pro-Palestinian initiatives. Virtually every Irish band scheduled to perform at the South By Southwest festival in Austin this month boycotted the event because of ties between some of the festival sponsors and Israel. Sally Rooney, the best-selling Irish novelist regarded as a voice of millennials, in 2021 refused to allow her work to be published in Israel.

In a recent op-ed for the Irish Times, Rooney chided Varadkar for not going far enough in his criticism of Biden. She criticized him for joining Biden’s St. Patrick’s Day celebration, saying it enabled the president’s support of Israel.

“Strong straightforward criticism is reserved for the relatively small (and increasingly globally isolated) state of Israel,” she wrote. “This way, our Government can bask in the moral glow of condemning the bombers, while preserving a cozy relationship with those supplying the bombs.”

Irish people who back the Palestinians often ground their sympathies in the perception that both peoples were, or are, colonized — the Irish by the United Kingdom, and the Palestinians by Israel.

“The apparatus of occupation – armed military patrols on city streets, military checkpoints, segregated cities and separation walls – that shape daily life today in occupied Palestine is almost identical to the one once utilized by the British in Northern Ireland,”

“I also believe there are lessons that can be drawn from our own peace process in Northern Ireland, particularly the concept of parity of esteem and the totality of relationships,” The Irish are often at pains to say that their advocacy for the Palestinians does not mean they are anti-Israel. In 2011, when the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth quoted top Israeli diplomats as saying that Ireland was the “most hostile country in Europe,” Irish officials told The Irish Times that was a misconception.

“The notion that this government is or would be trying to stoke up anti-Israeli feeling is untrue,” a foreign ministry spokesman told the paper. “We are not hostile to Israel. We are critical of policies, particularly in the occupied Palestinian territories. These are not the same things.”

Varadkar also recently drew criticism from Israel over a social media post celebrating the release of Emily Hand, a child with dual Israeli-Irish citizenship who was taken hostage by Hamas and freed during a November ceasefire. He wrote, “An innocent child who was lost has now been found and returned.”

Israeli government spokesman Eylon Levy responded, “Emily Hand wasn’t ‘lost.’ She was brutally abducted by the death squads that massacred her neighbors. She wasn’t ‘found.’ Hamas knew where she was all along and cynically held her as a hostage.”

On Sunday, Varadkar stressed his sense of identification with the Palestinians. But despite his criticism, he added that he also recognizes a shared history between Ireland and Israel.

“Mr. President, we also see Israel’s history reflected in our eyes,” he said. “A diaspora whose heart never left home, no matter how many generations passed; a nation-state that was reborn; and a language revived.”

“We were not carrying weapons or anything, we are civilians. We wanted to get food because we are starving here in Gaza,” said Mustafa Lolo, who said he was shot in the legs trying to get aidOn Friday, the IDF released the results of a review of the circumstances behind the February 29 truck convoy incident and repeated that troops had only fired at individuals they felt posed a threat.

“The command review found that IDF troops did not fire at the humanitarian convoy, but did fire at a number of suspects who approached the nearby forces and posed a threat to them,” it said in a statement.

Hamas rejected the report which it said was an attempt to exonerate soldiers from the “horrific crime.”

Palestinian health authorities claimed more than 100 people were killed in the incident and that most were shot by IDF troops. Israel, however, said most of the dead and wounded were trampled or run over as people scrambled for supplies.

**Breakdown of civil order**

UN agencies had no connection with the convoy, which was operated by private contractors and overseen by the IDF. However, they have said aid deliveries have become increasingly difficult amid a general breakdown in civil order.

“When fighting continues, when people are desperate, when the social fabric is torn down and lawlessness is on the rise, it gets harder and harder for us on the other side — once it’s been checked and verified — to receive and distribute safely,”

n a report on Wednesday, the United Nations humanitarian agency OCHA pointed to “the diminished presence of local police, following a spate of attacks by Israeli forces that led to police casualties.”

Israel says its goal in the war is the destruction of Hamas, following the terrorist group’s attack on Israel on October 7 in which 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were murdered and 253 were abducted.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza claims that almost 31,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel in the war, but the number cannot be independently verified as it is believed to include both Hamas terrorists and civilians, some of whom were killed as a consequence of the terror group’s own rocket misfires.

Israel was beefing up forces and security measures in Jerusalem Sunday ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, as the war in Gaza cast a somber mood on normally festive preparations by Muslims and ratcheted up fears of violence amid already sky-high tensions.

Thousands of police have been deployed around the narrow streets of the Old City in Jerusalem, where tens of thousands of worshipers are expected every day at the flashpoint Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam. The compound sits atop the Temple Mount, the holiest place in Judaism where the two biblical temples stood.

The sacred Ramadan month, which sees those observing abstain from food and water from sunrise to sunset, marks a period of religious reflection, family get-togethers and giving across the Muslim world. Religious authorities in Saudi Arabia saw the crescent moon Sunday night, meaning Monday is the first day of the fast in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, as well as much of the rest of the Muslim world, though others, like Jordan, will begin the holy month Tuesday.

Israeli security officials fear that Muslim anger over the Gaza war could rise to a crescendo during Ramadan, fueling unrest, especially if Israeli authorities attempt to limit access to the Haram al-Sharif holy site in Jerusalem, known to Jews as the Temple Mount.

Saudi King Salman specifically pointed to the Israel-Hamas war in remarks released to the public after his country’s Ramadan announcement.

As it pains us that the month of Ramadan falls this year, in light of the attacks our brothers in Palestine are suffering from, we stress the need for the international community to assume its responsibilities, to stop these brutal crimes, and provide safe humanitarian and relief corridors,” the king said.

War cabinet minister Benny Gantz issued a direct appeal on Sunday evening to Muslim citizens of Israel, declaring that its war in Gaza is “not against Islam.

“These days, the State of Israel is in a difficult campaign that began with a murderous attack by Hamas terrorists on all Israeli citizens, including Muslims,” Gantz said in a pre-recorded message. “Our war is not against Islam — but against those who harmed the values of Islam. Against those who committed crimes against humanity, and also sought to tear apart Israeli society and our common future.”

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Declaring that Hamas wants to see Ramadan turn from a month of prayer to “a month of blood,” Gantz asserted that the Gaza-based terror group “doesn’t represent the absolute majority of Israel’s Arab citizens.”

The minister said that October 7 proved that “Arab society is an integral part of the State of Israel. When we are in danger, we are all in the same danger and face it together.”

He added a pledge to maintain freedom of worship on the Temple Mount and called on Israeli Muslims to ignore “the extremists who try to incite and harm us.”

Police said earlier Sunday that terror groups were attempting to stir up unrest in the capital around Ramadan by spreading “false information regarding the reality in Jerusalem, the Old City and in particular the Temple Mount.”

“You grew up and you sang the song of your life, a song of kindness and generosity,” Ben David’s father, Haim, said at his funeral on Sunday, making a reference to his name, which is Hebrew for “my nation sings.

Now, his father said, “You are a soldier up above, and we are here down below trying to be with [your wife] Shlomit, the brave warrior, and your children.” His widow, Shlomit, said at his funeral that he was “always striding ahead, always taking charge, always giving. A man of generosity with no facade… the pain is horrible and scary. The longing hurts. My heart is broken. I’ve been missing you already for five months,” she said, referencing how long he was serving in the reserves.

The military said Sunday morning that the Hamas operative who was responsible for killing Ben David was killed in an airstrike. The IDF released footage of the strike, which it said was directed by troops of the Egoz commando unit.

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The strike came as the IDF’s Commando Brigade continued to focus on the Hamad Town residential complex in Khan Younis, where troops have been fighting since March 3.

The IDF said Sunday morning that its troops were engaged in “intense fighting” against Hamas gunmen in the complex of modern apartment buildings

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said Sunday that pre-Ramadan truce negotiations had failed because Israel refused to promise a permanent ceasefire, as Israel’s war cabinet huddled to discuss ongoing but seemingly stalled attempts to reach a deal to pause the war and release the hostages.

In a recorded speech, the Qatar-based leader of the terror organization said that Israel “evaded giving clear guarantees regarding the ceasefire, the withdrawal of its forces or the guarantees for the return of the displaced Gazans.”

The comments came a day after Israel’s Mossad intelligence service [issued a rare statement](https://www.timesofisrael.com/mossad-hamas-toughening-demands-for-hostage-deal-seeks-ramadan-escalation/) blaming Hamas for the impasse, claiming that the terror group was stiffening its demands and uninterested in reaching a deal, preferring to foment unrest over Ramadan instead.

Haniyeh claimed Hamas “showed positivity and responsibility in the course of the negotiations.” But he said that the terror group would not accept an agreement “that does not end the war or expel the enemy from Gaza.”

Israel has rejected Hamas’s conditioning of further hostage releases on an Israeli commitment to end the war as “delusional,” vowing to resume the campaign as soon as any hostages-for-truce deal is carried out.

Haniyeh said Hamas was in support of keeping talks going. “I say clearly that the one who bears responsibility for not reaching an agreement is [Israel],” Haniyeh said. “However, I say that we are open to continuing negotiations.”

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Haniyeh thanked the “resistance fronts” – Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, as well as other Iran-backed forces – for supporting the terror group’s fight against Israel. Hamas avowedly seeks Israel’s destruction.

Egyptian security sources told the Saudi news channel al-Arabiya on Sunday that the country had been in contact with senior Hamas and Israeli figures in an effort to restart the negotiations for a truce during the first week of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins Monday in some parts of the Muslim world.

US, Egyptian and Qatari mediators have been scrambling to secure a six-week truce in the five-month-old war in Gaza based on a framework reached in Paris last month.

The Paris framework, thus far rejected by Hamas, would see 40 children, women, elderly and sick hostages released in the first phase of some six weeks, in exchange for some 400 Palestinian security prisoners, with the possibility of further releases to be negotiated.

Israel did not send a delegation to the latest round of truce talks in Cairo, after Hamas refused to provide a list of living hostages, and a Hamas delegation left the Egyptian capital on Thursday after expressing frustration with Israel’s positions, heading to Qatar for consultation with the group’s leadership.

An unnamed senior Israeli source close to the negotiations was quoted by Channel 12 on Saturday saying that Hamas leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, “believes that the more his [Gaza] public suffers, the greater the pressure on Israel and the better the terms he’ll get in negotiations [on a hostage deal]. A deal takes two sides, and right now the other side doesn’t want one.”

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Last month, The Wall Street Journal reported that Haniyeh and Sinwar [were at odds](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-leaders-at-odds-over-proposed-hostage-release-deal-report/) over the conditions Hamas should accept for a deal with Israel.

According to the report, the prevailing dynamic within Hamas has flipped, with the terrorist organization’s chief in Gaza, Sinwar, backing a temporary truce while its leaders outside of the Strip are pushing for further Israeli concessions, a permanent ceasefire, and a plan to rebuild Gaza.

Officials briefed on the talks told The New York Times Thursday that Hamas has “backed away” from the proposed agreement in Paris and, in addition to a permanent ceasefire, is also demanding the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip, the return of displaced Gazans to their homes in the northern part of the enclave, and “provisions” for Gazans.

Israel had already agreed to the Paris principles, including a temporary truce of six weeks, a “redeployment” of Israeli troops within Gaza — but not a complete withdrawal — and for Israel to enable the return of Palestinian women and children to northern Gaza, from where hundreds of thousands evacuated during the fighting, and which Israel has kept cut off from the rest of the enclave.

Meanwhile, Qatar has reportedly threatened to expel Hamas’s leaders from the country if they don’t agree to a hostage deal, The Wall Street Journal reported Saturday, citing an unnamed Hamas official and Egyptian officials. Qatar, a key mediator between Israel and the terror group, hosts Hamas’s political bureau chief Haniyeh.

Husam Badran, a senior official of the terror group who is based in Doha, denied the claim. He told the WSJ that without a deal, violence will escalate during Ramadan, set to begin Monday morning in much of the Muslim world.

“We didn’t declare negotiations have been stopped. We are the party most keen to stop this war,”

Opposition MKs denounced the hearing as an effort to “silence” campaigners against settler violence, with Labor leader MK Merav Michaeli accusing the chairman of the subcommittee on the West Bank, MK Tzvi Succot of the ultranationalist Religious-Zionism party, of seeking to “present an upside down and false world” in which campaigners against settler violence were the problem, rather than extremist settlers.

During the hearing, right-wing and pro-settlement organizations, together with coalition MKs, alleged that civil rights campaigners and pro-Palestinian activists, whom they termed “anarchists,” were conducting a coordinated campaign to inflame tensions in the West Bank and smear the settlement movement.

Backing these claims, a senior police commander in the police’s Judea and Samaria district said during the hearing that some 50 percent of complaints over settler violence turned out to be false.

But Michaeli and fellow Labor MK Gilad Kariv accused Succot of using committee hearings to create “a smokescreen” designed to obscure extremist settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank.

“They [pro-Palestinian activists] are aggressive to IDF soldiers, to settlers, they damage property, they blacken Israel’s name around the world, engage in the demonization and delegitimization of Israel and damage our image,” said far-right MK Limor Son Har Melech of the Otzma Yehudit party.

But Eran Nissan, CEO of the Mehazkim progressive activism organization who also spoke during the hearing, expressed skepticism, arguing that if the police had determined complaints against settlers to be false then indictments against those making such claims would have been filed.

Muallem told The Times of Israel that no pro-Palestinian civil rights activists were indicted in 2023, while 16 indictments were served against Israelis for “nationalist crimes” in the West Bank.

No figures were presented to the committee for alleged violations of the law by civil rights and pro-Palestinian activists.

Opening the hearing, Succot said, “So much unnecessary talk has been said in the past about ‘settler violence’ but no one has dealt here in this house until now with those who are really doing great and severe violence in Judea and Samaria — left-wing, anarchist and extremist activists who harass IDF soldiers and the heroic settlers.”

It would be impossible for Israel to prevail in the war against the Hamas terror group in Gaza “without fighting against those who do everything they can to interfere with our just war,” said Succot, who was arrested on at least four occasions for suspected radical activity before becoming a Knesset member.

During the hearing, the Documenting and Monitoring Unauthorized Activities (DMU) organization, which had called for the hearing, screened a presentation with video footage of pro-Palestinian activists harassing and verbally abusing soldiers and others.

DMU head Amit Barak focused in particular on foreign campaign groups such as the pro-Palestinian International Solidarity Movement that send activists to the West Bank.

United Nations chief Antonio Guterres on Monday defended the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, describing it as a “lifeline of hope and dignity.”

During a visit to the Wihdat refugee camp in the Jordanian capital Amman, Guterres said it would be “cruel and incomprehensible” to halt UNRWA’s vital services to Palestinian refugees across the region

We must strive to keep the one-of-a-kind services that UNRWA provides flowing because that keeps hope flowing,” Guterres said during his visit to the camp

“In a darkening world, UNRWA is the one ray of light for millions of people. I see that hope here. Now more than ever, we must not take away that hope.

He also sought to “honor the 171 women and men of UNRWA who have been killed in Gaza — the largest number of deaths of UN staff in our history.”

“Are they coming back? Is this the new normal?” Biss wondered in an interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. He added that it would be disastrous “if city council meetings just become white nationalist and neo-Nazi demonstration sites.”

According to watchdogs, that is exactly what is happening. This kind of openly antisemitic demonstration during a public meeting is part of a white supremacist strategy that predates the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7 by a few months — the GDL calls it their “City Council Death Squad.”

But the Evanston scene is also emblematic of an uncomfortable new reality: white supremacist activity targeting Jews has ticked up sharply in the months since the war in Israel and Gaza began, and it shows no signs of dissipating. What’s more, watchdogs say, white supremacists are also capitalizing on widespread anti-Israel rhetoric to find quarter in public meetings and protests.

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While much public attention has been devoted to the reported rise of antisemitism in pro-Palestinian and progressive spaces during the past five months, researchers and analysts say those who care about anti-Jewish bigotry need to keep their eyes on the far right, too.

“When the war first started we saw an immediate reaction from white supremacist leaders,” Carla Hill, senior director of investigative research for the ADL’s Center on Extremism, told JTA. Hill said the common refrain was one of “applauding Hamas and even celebrating the deaths of Jews at the hands of Hamas.”

The October 7 Hamas-led onslaught that led to the outbreak of the war saw thousands of terrorists storm across the border into southern Israel where they murdered 1,200 people and abducted 253 more to the Gaza Strip, most of whom were civilians. The slaughter was marked in its brutality as its perpetrators committed acts of rape, sexual assault and torture, mutilating many of their victims and burning others alive, including entire families.

Researchers who track extremist activity online told JTA that violent threats specifically directed at Jews, on unmoderated social networks popular with white supremacists like 4Chan, Telegram and Odysee, shot up after the Hamas massacre and have remained high ever since.

“It literally is a new normal. There’s just far more violent antisemitism on these platforms than we’ve ever seen before,” said Heidi Beirich, co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism.

Beirich’s research tracks the movements of extremist groups, including online violent threats directed at marginalized communities, and works closely with the ADL to monitor antisemitism. She said there was a 500% spike in antisemitic threats in the 24-hour period after October 7; by November, that volume was still higher than pre-October 7 levels. Threats of violent antisemitism remain high on these platforms today, she said.

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In addition, the ADL says, white supremacist activity in physical locations, including city council meetings and rallies, has quickly adapted to incorporate pro-Palestinian rhetoric. The Goyim Defense League has distributed “Free Palestine” flyers at rallies in Pittsburgh and other locations. The fliers aim to attract a broader audience by omitting any obviously antisemitic language and directing attendees to the neo-Nazi group’s website.

“They’re definitely seizing an opportunity. That’s what extremists do,” Hill said. “They’ll use anything like that to get their foot into a conversation.”

The GDL, whose members appeared in Evanston, has been active for the past few years. Prior to October 7, their members frequently distributed antisemitic flyers throughout various communities and hung banners to capitalize on antisemitic comments in the media by the rapper Ye, formerly known as Kanye West. “Active clubs,” neo-Nazi groups that also stage public demonstrations, were forming prior to October 7, but also have been on the rise since, with recent demonstrations in Ohio and [Tennessee](https://globalextremism.org/post/active-clubs-spreading-globally/).

Hill said the groups’ public comments at city councils will often strategically begin with pro-Palestinian talking points, taking advantage of a growing movement to push local governments to adapt ceasefire resolutions, before veering into explicit antisemitism.

Despite media reports [suggesting that such tactics have infiltrated the pro-Palestinian movement on a widespread scale](https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7zx5a/neo-nazis-hijack-pro-palestine-protest-mike-enoch), Hill said she has not been able to determine any evidence to that effect. But she emphasized that white supremacists also hate Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians: “Those guys hate any people of color,” she said.

A white supremacist demonstration outside a synagogue in Missoula, Montana, weeks after October 7, [was quickly followed by a clash with nearby pro-Palestinian demonstrators](https://dailymontanan.com/2023/10/24/pro-palestinian-protesters-clash-with-white-supremacists-in-missoula-during-the-weekend/). Yet GDL leader Jon Minadeo Jr. has emphasized in his communications to followers that, while the group opposes all minority groups, getting rid of Jews is its first priority.

The Jewish pro-Palestinian group IfNotNow — which is harshly critical of Israel and has [accused it of genocide](https://twitter.com/IfNotNowOrg/status/1712186897651380706) in Gaza since the days immediately following Hamas’ October 7 invasion — cautioned other activists not to engage with far-right advocacy for Palestinians.

“Nazis are trying to take advantage of this moment to redirect sympathy for Palestinians towards antisemitic conspiracy,” the group [posted online in November](https://twitter.com/IfNotNowOrg/status/1719829659146162408). “We are unflinching: antisemitism is wrong, it is unacceptable, and it has no place in any struggle for liberation.”

The uptick in right-wing antisemitism is occurring as the mainstream Jewish community has voiced particular concern about a rise in antisemitism among the pro-Palestinian left. [A study published last week by the ADL’s Center for Antisemitism Research](https://www.adl.org/resources/report/antisemitic-attitudes-america-2024) seemed to bear this out, finding a correlation between antisemitic attitudes and certain pro-Palestinian beliefs like the idea that Israeli products should be boycotted and that “Israeli operatives are secretly manipulating US national policy.” It also reported that millennials are likelier to embrace antisemitic tropes than older generations.

ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt has also recently pushed the idea that left-wing anti-Zionism is just as dangerous for Jews as right-wing antisemitism, and he has repeatedly condemned IfNotNow and its frequent partner Jewish Voice for Peace, an anti-Zionist group. (He also drew criticism this week for presenting an award to Jared Kushner, the Jewish son-in-law and former adviser to ex-president Donald Trump, who has himself drawn criticism from across the ideological spectrum over his repeated reluctance to condemn white supremacists.)

But Beirich said the far right still represents the much bigger threat to Jewish safety. Even in light of recent reported incidents of left-wing protesters violently targeting Jewish and pro-Israel people, she said the substantial majority of violent antisemitic attacks have originated from the right. She added that the possibility of a second Trump presidency — which gained likelihood this week, as he effectively clinched the Republican nominating contest — could exacerbate that threat.

“I do think a second Trump term, if it happens to occur, is going to further animate these bad actors on the far right, just like the first one did,” Beirich said.

Far-right attacks such as the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting and the deadly Charlottesville neo-Nazi march, both of which occurred under Trump’s watch, could have another uptick if Trump re-entered the White House, she said. The Pittsburgh shooter was an active user of Gab, a social network popular among extremists that is similar to the ones where antisemitic sentiment is buzzing today.

But while there is broad recognition of the need to address far-right antisemitic activity, Biss told JTA that there is a limit to how much city councils like his can restrict the right to public comment. The next Evanston council meeting, on Monday, will include a discussion of possible ways the body can change its proceedings around the comment period; that discussion may also, he warned, attract more white supremacists.

He is still determined to try to change the process. At the meeting following the one targeted by the GDL, Biss elaborated on his decision to cut off public comment early by invoking his Holocaust survivor grandmother.

“They started with rhetoric about, conspiracies about, how every single problem a person might have was a result of the Jews controlling the world,” Biss said about the Nazis. “They started with vandalism and graffiti and isolated attacks on the street, and Jews not feeling safe being out in public and true to who they were. And it accelerated and accelerated to a point that we all know a lot about.

“The folks who participated in public comment on Thursday, they were kooks, they were provocateurs and trolls,” he continued. “But they were also vectors for the most damaging virus that we have experienced as a people.’

The Hamas-run health ministry in the Gaza Strip accused Israeli troops of opening fire from “tanks and helicopters” at the civilians gathered at Kuwait Square late Thursday, killing 21 people and wounding more than 150 others.

The Israeli military said that after conducting an “intensive preliminary review,” it found that “the IDF did not open fire at the aid convoy at Kuwait Square.”

As aid trucks were entering [the corridor], the Palestinian gunmen continued to shoot as the crowd of Gazans began looting the trucks,” the IDF said, adding that it also identified several civilians who had been run over by the truck“A review of our operational systems and IDF troops [on the ground] found that no tank shelling, airstrike or gunfire was carried out toward the Gazan crowd in the area of the aid convoy,” the military said.

The IDF also issued aerial footage of what it said showed Palestinian gunmen opening fire amid the crowd during the first incident, an hour before the aid trucks had arrived

n a statement, the military said that while it “continues its humanitarian effort to supply food and humanitarian aid to the civilians of the Gaza Strip, Hamas terrorists continue to harm Gazan civilians who are seeking food, and Hamas is blaming Israel for it.

“As a result, on the first Friday of the month of Ramadan, a smear campaign was created with the aim of spreading baseless misinformation for the sake of instigating violence in other arenas,”

the probe found that shots were fired at several Gazans who moved toward soldiers and a tank at an IDF checkpoint, in a way that “posed a threat to them.” Hamas said any attempt to exclude it from the political scene after the war was “delusional.”

In a recent warning, a security official told a Hamas-linked news website that attempts by clans or community leaders to cooperate with Israel’s plans to administer Gaza would be seen as “treason” and met with an “iron fist.

Former US president and presumptive Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said Sunday that he would tell Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to finish the war against Hamas in Gaza “quickly and get back to the world of peace” if he won the election in November.

Netanyahu has insisted that Israel is not far from completing the war and would be weeks away from doing so once it completes its still-yet-to-be-launched operation to dismantle the terror group’s remaining battalions in the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

Trump did not go as far as to call for a ceasefire in the Strip, but his remarks in an interview to Fox News’s MediaBuzz are the second time this month that the former president has hinted at discomfort with Israel’s ongoing war against Hamas.

Asked what his message to Netanyahu would be, Trump said, “I think you have to finish it up, and do it quickly and get back to the world of peace.”

Trump said if he were reelected in November, he would end the war between Russia and Ukraine even before being sworn in in January 2025, and would also bring “peace in the Middle East,” recalling his success in brokering the Abraham Accords, which saw the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan agree to normalize ties with Israel.

n a March 5 [Fox interview](https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-oct-7-attack-israels-response-wouldnt-have-happened-if-i-were-president/), Trump said Hamas’s October 7 “attack on Israel, and likewise, Israel’s counterattack… would never have happened if I was president.” While the remark indicated questionable feelings regarding Israel’s prosecution of the war, Trump added that Israel must “finish the problem.”

Trump and Netanyahu have had a checkered relationship, with the former often indicating that he has never forgiven the Israeli premier for congratulating Joe Biden after he defeated Trump in the 2020 election.

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The former president also criticized Jerusalem for seeking to maintain relations with the Democratic Party.

“The Democrats are very bad for Israel. Israel sticks with them. I guess Israel’s loyal — maybe to a fault — because they stick with these guys,” he said in relation to [Chuck Schumer’s speech](https://www.timesofisrael.com/senate-leader-schumer-calls-for-israeli-election-says-netanyahu-an-obstacle-to-peace/) last week in which he called on Israel to hold elections to replace Netanyahu.

“If [Biden] were a supporter of Israel, the Iran nuclear deal would have never been signed, and Israel would have never been attacked,” Trump added, referring to the accord that was signed in 2015 when Biden was vice president.

Returning to Schumer’s remarks, Trump recalled that Israel “lost a lot of people on October 7. People have to remember that.

“He’s seeing the Palestinians and he’s seeing the marches and they are big. Then he says I want to go that way instead of Israel,” Trump suggested. “[He] sees a lot of people protesting out there and they happen to be Palestinians or… from the Middle East. He was probably shocked to see it, and all of a sudden he dumped Israel.”

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“He just said essentially that Bibi Netanyahu should take a walk,” Trump added, using the prime minister’s nickname.

Ali Halhouli, the boy’s father, was at home when he heard the gunshot — and then his son crying out for his mother. “When I rushed out of here I saw him lying on his face,” he saidIt’s clear there is a trigger-happy attitude among Israeli soldiers and Border Police officers, and it affects Palestinian children too,” said Sarit Michaeli, a B’Tselem spokeswoman.

“Regarding the specific case in Shuafat refugee camp,” she said, “a young child was not posing any threat to a heavily armed Border Police officer.”

Halhouli, the youngest of seven siblings, was shot at around 8 p.m. last Tuesday outside his home on a garbage-strewn alleyway, his father said.

He was roughly 60 meters (200 feet) from the police watchtower; video of the incident shows Halhouli pointing the firework in the rough direction of the watchtower, but not directly at it.

We are scared,” he said, looking up at the watchtower.

Shuafat, home to some 60,000 Palestinians, has long been a flashpoint.

It is a poor, densely packed neighborhood that lacks municipal services despite falling within Jerusalem’s city borders.

The boy is dead, you brought him dead,” Ali Halhouli said, recounting one of the doctor’s words. Soon after, a police officer arrived at the ward and said they needed to transfer the body to a forensic institute for an autopsy. A 12-year-old boy a terrorist?” Ali Halhouli said, clearly hurt by the remark.

Economy Minister Nir Barkat branded Qatar an “enemy” that “funds terror all over the world” during a Thursday interview on MSNBC.

Responding to the Likud minister, who has sought since the war’s outbreak to criticize Netanyahu from the right, Qatar foreign ministry spokesman Majed al-Ansari called Barkat “another headline-seeking politician in Israel [who] is using ‘Qatar-bashing’ as a means to further his own political future.”

“Rather than being preoccupied with supporting in the efforts to secure a deal, Minister Barkat finds his time is better spent attacking the mediators who are working round the clock to reach a deal that ensures the release of hostages and stop the bloodshed,” Ansari said.

“Spreading lies and baseless accusations about the country that helped secure the release of 109 hostages and is relentlessly working on the release of the remaining hostages, is another sign of political recklessness and selfishness,” he added.

According to a Channel 12 report Saturday, Israel has tentatively agreed to release a “more generous” number of Palestinian prisoners as part of a new compromise suggested by the US. But it is still refusing to countenance ending the war to secure an agreement with Hamas

The original Paris framework from last month provided for a six-week truce and the release of about 400 security prisoners for about 40 hostages — women, children, the sick and elderly — in the first phase of a deal. A new US compromise is “more generous” for Hamas, but has been accepted by Israel, Channel 12 reported, without elaborating. The teams were now waiting for a response from Gaza, which could take days, the report said

A Hamas official also told AFP Saturday that Israel “refuses to agree on a comprehensive ceasefire and refuses the complete withdrawal of its forces from Gaza.”

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The official added that Israel had indicated it wanted to keep matters of relief, shelter and aid under its control, and demanded “the United Nations not return to work, especially in the northern Gaza Strip.”

The Channel 12 report said that the war cabinet, when authorizing some limited leeway for the Israeli team before its departure on Friday, authorized the negotiators to discuss the process of civilian evacuees from northern Gaza to return.

As Barnea and the other officials left for Qatar on Friday, an Israeli official told The Times of Israel that “there has been no real progress” in negotiations with Hamas.

“The Americans are dressing it up as progress,” said the source. “The pressure to move forward is coming from them.”

Echoing that assessment, Channel 12 on Friday quoted an Israeli source saying the families of hostages should not get the impression that a breakthrough was likely, but also said the talks were progressing

Palestinian terror group Hamas said Monday night that it informed mediators seeking the release of Israeli hostages that it will stick to its original position on demanding a permanent ceasefire, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, a return of displaced Palestinians and a “real” exchange of “prisoners” — demands Israel has already rejected as delusional.

While the terror group has conditioned any further hostage releases on an Israeli commitment to end the war, Israel has insisted that its military campaign to destroy Hamas’s military and governance capabilities will resume once any hostage-truce deal is implemented.

Some 130 hostages — not all of them alive — are believed to remain in Gaza since Hamas’s October 7 massacre, which saw terrorists kill some 1,200 people and abduct another 253, mostly civilians.

Hamas claimed in a statement on Monday that Israel “did not respond to any of the basic demands of our people and our resistance (Hamas): a comprehensive ceasefire, withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the return of the displaced, and a real exchange of prisoners.” The statement appeared to constitute a rejection of the latest proposal on offer in Doha, where Israel and Hamas have been holding indirect talks via mediators from Egypt, Qatar, and the United States.

The terror group, which led the October 7 attack on Israel that triggered the war, claimed “[Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu and his extremist government bear full responsibility for thwarting all negotiation efforts and obstructing reaching an agreement so far.”

he statement called the decision “a clear retreat from the consistent US position in the Security Council since the beginning of the war,” and one that “gives Hamas hope that international pressure will allow them to get a ceasefire without releasing our hostages.”

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Netanyahu also canceled a planned trip to Washington by his top aides to discuss plans for an offensive in the Gaza city of Rafah, a step that the US [viewed as an overreaction](https://www.timesofisrael.com/perplexed-by-overreaction-white-house-says-pm-stirring-crisis-in-us-israel-ties/).

Israeli Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan also blasted the Security Council for adopting a resolution that did not explicitly condition a ceasefire on the release of the hostages.

“On the one hand, the resolution says that taking civilians hostage is in violation of international law, yet on the other hand — despite the fact that you know Hamas won’t listen to your calls and release the hostages — you demand a ceasefire,” Erdan said in remarks to the body after the vote.

Erdan said that the council’s failure to condition a ceasefire on the hostages’ release “not only isn’t helpful, but it undermines the effort to secure their release. It is harmful to these efforts because it gives Hamas terrorists hope to get a ceasefire without releasing the hostages.”

### Talks ongoing?

Egypt and Qatar have been trying to narrow differences between Israel and Hamas over what a hostage-truce deal should look like.

Reports circulating in Hebrew media on Sunday [indicated](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-willing-to-free-some-800-inmates-for-40-captives-as-talks-given-50-50-odds/) that Jerusalem had softened its position and could be willing to release hundreds more Palestinian prisoners than initially agreed to in an initial phase of an accord.

“Right now, we’re feeling 50/50 about the chances for a deal,” an Israeli official told The Times of Israel on Sunday.

During the talks, Israel had accepted a recent US compromise proposal, a second Israeli official told The Times of Israel on Sunday, which has since been sent to Hamas. The official did not say what the proposal entailed, but reports suggested Israel was willing to nearly double the number of security inmates it had already agreed to release in exchange for 40 hostages — women, children, the sick and elderly — in the first phase of a 6-week truce deal.

According to a report carried by Channel 12 news, Israel is now willing to release as many as 800 prisoners, including 100 inmates convicted of murder. Other Hebrew media reports suggested Israel was prepared to release 700 security prisoners in return for the 40.

A framework deal Israel agreed to in Paris last month included a willingness to release 400 security inmates in the first phase of the deal.

An Israeli official told The Times of Israel that the main sticking point in talks has been the number of high-value prisoners Israel will release in exchange for female soldiers held by Hamas.

According to Channel 12, Israel showed increased flexibility as well by being willing to discuss allowing Palestinian civilians to return to northern Gaza, a first.

Quoting an unnamed senior source close to the talks, the channel reported that Israel has offered the return of 2,000 Gazans a day to the north, beginning two weeks after an agreement goes into effect and a temporary ceasefire begins.

The source said there would be unspecified conditions for a return to the north of the Strip, which Israel demanded civilians evacuate from when the war began, as fighting focused on Hamas’s seat of power in Gaza City and its environs. Men would likely not be permitted to return, according to the report.

“The catastrophic living conditions of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have deteriorated further, in particular in view of the prolonged and widespread deprivation of food and other basic necessities to which the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have been subjected,” the court said in its decision.

The Palestinian Authority and South Africa, which petitioned the court, welcomed the decision, while Israel said it was working to expand aid and denied limiting relief, blaming Hamas for dire conditions in the Strip.

“Palestinians in Gaza are no longer facing only a risk of famine… but that famine is setting in,” the court said on Thursday, noting that “the provisional measures indicated in the Order of 26 January 2024 do not fully address the consequences arising from the changes in the situation… thus justifying the modification of these measures.”

he ICJ on Thursday reaffirmed those measures and further ordered Israel to ensure “the unhindered provision at scale… of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance, including food, water, electricity, fuel, shelter, clothing, hygiene and sanitation requirements,” and to allow in medical supplies, as well as “increasing the capacity and number of land crossing points and maintaining them open for as long as necessary.”

The court also ordered Israel to ensure that the military “does not commit acts” that violate the Genocide Convention, “including by preventing, through any action, the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian assistance,” and ordered Israel to report back to the court within one month.

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In a statement late Thursday, the Foreign Ministry said it was looking to expand aid delivery options and the amount of relief getting into the Strip, denying it placed any limit on the aid.

“Israel will continue to promote new initiatives, and to expand existing ones, in order to enable and facilitate the flow of aid to the Gaza Strip in a continuous and extensive manner, by land, air, and sea, together with UN bodies and other partners in the international community,” Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lior Hayat said in [a statement posted on X](https://twitter.com/liorhaiat/status/1773472467169796243?s=46&t=C_IpnZ82r3q6sVIRTUUsTg). “This includes ongoing efforts to increase the scale, and means of access for such aid despite the operational challenges on the ground and Hamas׳s active and abhorrent efforts to commandeer, hoard, and steal aid.”

Jerusalem also accused South Africa of making “cynical attempts” to exploit the world court to undermine Israel’s right to self-defense and to win the release of remaining hostages.

South Africa, which accused Israel of genocide at the ICJ, welcomed Thursday’s decision, calling it “significant.”

“The fact that Palestinian deaths are not solely caused by bombardment and ground attacks, but also by disease and starvation, indicates a need to protect the group’s right to exist,” the South African president said in a statement.

The Palestinian Foreign Ministry thanked South Africa, calling the case “a vital step in the global effort to hold Israel accountable for perpetrating genocide.”

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Israel blames the ailing humanitarian situation on aid agencies’ failure to distribute supplies, and on Hamas and armed groups who have looted trucks entering the Gaza. The agencies say their work has become far more difficult amid the fighting and a lack of security for aid convoys.

COGAT, the Israeli Defense Ministry body governing civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, on Saturday, posted an image of what it said was aid that had “accumulated” on the other side of the border at Rafah and was waiting for distribution by the United Nations.

“This is the equivalent of hundreds of aid trucks — which isn’t being distributed to Gazan civilians. We remain committed to the transfer of aid to Gaza,” it wrote on X.

Washington on Thursday said it was still reviewing the ICJ’s most recent decision and had no immediate comment on its substance.

“But as a general proposition, of course, increasing humanitarian assistance to Gaza is something that we support and something that we have urged Israel to help facilitate,” US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said.

Earlier in March, South Africa approached the ICJ to request additional preliminary measures against Israel, “in light of the new facts and changes in the situation in Gaza — particularly the situation of widespread starvation — brought about by the continuing egregious breaches” of the convention by Israel.

Naledi Pandor, South Africa’s foreign minister, [said in mid-March](https://www.timesofisrael.com/south-africa-israel-undermining-world-court-with-campaign-of-starvation-in-gaza/) that Israel had defied the January ruling, alleging a campaign of “starvation” in Gaza amid Israel’s war against Hamas.

Police say they arrested 11 people in the Old City throughout the day, including several suspects for chants of “incitement and support for terrorism” following morning prayers at the Temple Mount.

Nevertheless, this marked the third consecutive Friday of the Muslim holy month during which mass prayers took place largely peacefully, despite fears of disturbances after the Hamas terror group had called on Palestinian worshipers to barricade themselves inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque

At the beginning of the holy month, Hamas called on followers to “participate urgently in defending Al-Aqsa Mosque against the aggression that lurks in these critical times.” We wait for this every year,” said Munira Kamar, a Palestinian Christian from the Old City, who watched the parade pass, waving hello to cross-bearers, who stopped to give her young daughter a kiss on the cheek. “Of course, this year we are unhappy because of the situation with the ongoing war.”

The procession’s final stations are inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Jesus is believed to have been crucified and laid to rest before his resurrection on Easter. There, the impact of the war was clear: instead of the crowds who normally queue for hours in the church courtyard, entrance to the site

Comparing last year’s Easter festivities with this year is like light and day. Nobody’s here. Most of the people are locals,” said Fayaz Dakkak, a Palestinian storeowner whose family first opened the shop in 1942. His shop stood empty. “Usually people are joyful today and kids are excited. But when you compare children here who have water and food and a family to what’s happening in Gaza, how can you be happy?”

In northern Gaza, “the upward trend in non-trauma mortality is also expected to accelerate, resulting in all famine thresholds likely to be passed imminently,” the IPC said.

The study said the number of people projected to experience “catastrophic hunger” across the besieged enclave between now and mid-July had nearly doubled to more than 1.1 million, or about half the population, since the IPC last reported in December, when there was already record hunger

COGAT, the Israeli Defense Ministry body responsible for civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, said in [a response](https://govextra.gov.il/cogat/humanitarian-efforts/home/) Friday that “the report contains multiple factual and methodological flaws, some of them serious.” “Given the difficulty in conducting surveys and samplings, the remotely conducted surveys, or third-party surveys within the Gaza Strip, diminish the reliability of the data,” COGAT saidIt said it has tracked reports in Palestinian media “every day” of “food markets filled with food of all types and kinds” in various parts of Gaza, including its north.

“We outright reject any allegations according to which Israel is purposefully starving the civilian population in Gaza,” COGAT also said.

“Even at the height of hostilities, in a war that was forced upon it, Israel places no limits on the amount of aid that can enter Gaza, and absolutely does not limit the entrance of food. Israel also facilitates entry of complementary products such as cooking gas and diesel fuel for the operation of aid centers, bakeries, etc. Additionally, 14 million liters of water are supplied by Israel.”

It added that “in recent months between 150 and 200 trucks are admitted per day, most of which are food trucks. This is an 80% spike in comparison to the daily average food trucks that entered Gaza pre-October 7.”

COGAT once again argued that the main cause for food shortages was a lack of capability by international agencies operating in Gaza to distribute the goods: “The fact is that at any given moment there are hundreds of trucks held up at the Gazan side of the Kerem Shalom crossing after having completely been processed by the authorities in Israel, awaiting reception and distribution by the aid agencies.”

Additionally, COGAT noted the “reports and testimonies of theft, looting and commandeering of the aid trucks by armed players, some of them Hamas, others directed by Hamas, hijacking humanitarian aid and keeping it for its own interests, in a way that diminishes the amount of food that reaches the civilian population.

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“Moreover, Hamas uses its control over the aid to further its governance in the Gaza Strip,” COGAT said. “This phenomenon also impairs the ongoing work of the aid agencies.”

It’s impossible to find the data to meet their criteria in northern Gaza as people aren’t dying in hospital so it’s unrecorded,” said one aid worker who asked not to be named.

The IPC said that because of a lack of aid, almost all households were [skipping meals](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hunger-is-killing-us-gazans-increasingly-desperate-amid-growing-humanitarian-crisis/) every day and adults were reducing their meals so children could eat.

In northern Gaza, in nearly two-thirds of households, people went entire days and nights without eating at least 10 times in the last 30 days, it added. In southern areas, that applied to one-third of the households.

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The IPC analysis said famine could still be avoided if Israel and Hamas stop fighting and aid organizations gain increased access.

### US: Famine ‘quite possibly’ present in parts of north Gaza

A senior US State Department official told Reuters on Friday that famine is both a risk and “quite possibly” present in at least some areas in northern Gaza, while adding that the scarcity of trucks was a key obstacle for more humanitarian aid in the densely populated enclave.

“While we can say with confidence, that famine is a significant risk in the south and center but not present, in the north, it is both a risk and quite possibly is present in at least some areas, which accounts for the urgency with which we need to move goods, food at scale into the north,” said the senior US State Department official, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Earlier this month a spokesman for COGAT told The Times of Israel that “we don’t believe that there is starvation in the Gaza Strip.”

“That’s not to say that there aren’t difficulties in some areas, but that we are doing everything we can to facilitate large amounts of aid,” the spokesman said.

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Israel inspects all deliveries headed into the enclave to ensure materiel is not being smuggled to Hamas, slowing the process.

Israel is able to check 44 trucks an hour at Kerem Shalom and Nitzana, said the COGAT spokesman. “That is a lot more than what can be picked up on the other side.”

“We can inspect as fast as possible,” he said, adding that when necessary “we’re more than willing to create improvements.”

The spokesman added that there was an IDF team that meets daily with the UN and other aid organizations to understand what is needed on the ground in Gaza.

### Gunfire and stampede reported as desperate Gazans rush for food

Meanwhile, the Palestine Red Crescent said five people were killed and dozens wounded by gunfire and a stampede during an aid delivery Saturday in northern Gaza.

The Red Crescent said it happened after thousands of people gathered for the arrival of around 15 trucks of flour and other food, which were supposed to be handed out at Gaza City’s Kuwait roundabout, in the territory’s north.

The Red Crescent said three of the five killed early Saturday had been shot.

Eyewitnesses told AFP that Gazans overseeing the aid delivery shot in the air, but alleged Israeli troops in the area also fired and some moving trucks hit people trying to get the food.

The IDF told AFP it “has no record of the incident described.”

A group of nine participants in the 2024 Eurovision Song Contest released a joint statement Friday expressing their concern over “the current situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, and particularly in Gaza, and in Israel.”

“We do not feel comfortable being silent,” they said in the statement, following calls for artists to boycott Eurovision over Israel’s participation.

The contest will be held May 7-9 in Malmo, Sweden, with Israel’s Eden Golan performing “Hurricane,” widely perceived as being about the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023.

In the statement, representatives of the UK, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Switzerland, Denmark, Lithuania and Finland said: “It is important to us to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and communicate our heartfelt wish for peace, an immediate and lasting ceasefire, and the safe return of all hostages. We stand united against all forms of hate, including antisemitism and islamophobia.

“We firmly believe in the unifying power of music, enabling people to transcend differences and foster meaningful conversations and connections,” they said. “We feel that it is our duty to create and uphold this space, with a strong hope that it will inspire greater compassion and empathy.”

he UK’s Olly Alexander put out a separate statement on Instagram, saying he “understands and respects” the decision of those boycotting Eurovision, but won’t do so himself.

“It is my current belief that removing myself from the contest wouldn’t bring us any closer to our shared goal,” he said. “I hope and pray that our calls are answered and there is an end to the atrocities we are seeing taking place in Gaza.”

Alexander’s statement also came in response to a specific appeal by the organization Queers for Palestine to withdraw from the competition.

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“Hurricane,” which the Kan public broadcaster says is about a woman experiencing a personal crisis, keeps some of the lyrics from “[October Rain](https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/culture/709196/),” Israel’s original submission which was disqualified by organizers over charges it was too political.

I won’t be surprised if Iran fires directly at Israel,” former Military Intelligence head Amos Yadlin told the network, explaining that a [January missile strike](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pakistan-iran-agree-to-de-escalate-after-trading-air-strikes/) carried out by Iran on neighboring Pakistan set a precedent for such action.

The defeat of the Zionist regime in Gaza will continue and this regime will be close to decline and dissolution,” Khamenei said in a speech to the country’s officials in Tehran Wednesday. “Desperate efforts like the one they committed in Syria will not save them from defeat. Of course, they will also be slapped for that action,” he added.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said earlier on Wednesday that Israel is “increasing preparedness” in the face of threats from across the Middle East.

Speaking at a home-front readiness drill in Haifa, Gallant said that the country’s defense establishment is “expanding our operations against Hezbollah, against other bodies that threaten us,” and reiterated that Israel “strikes our enemies all over the Middle East.”

“We need to be prepared and ready for every scenario and every threat” against near enemies and distant enemies,” Gallant said, vowing that “we will know how to protect the citizens of Israel and we will know how to attack our enemies.”

Addressing the daily attacks on the northern border by the Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, Gallant said that one of the main issues Israel is facing is how to make it possible for some 80,000 displaced Israelis return safely to their homes in northern Israel.

“We prefer… an agreement that will result in the removal of the threat, but we have to prepare for the possibility of [using] force in Lebanon that can also take into account the scenario we are describing here, which is a scenario of war, and we need to be prepared for this issue and understand that it can happen,” Gallant said.

“They have faced this real dilemma that if they respond they could be courting a confrontation which they clearly don’t want,” he said. “They are trying to modulate their actions in a way that shows that they are responsive but not escalatory.”

“If they don’t respond in this case, it really would be a signal that their deterrence is a paper tiger,”

“I think Iran does not want a big Israel-Hezbollah war right now, so any response will not come in the form of a big Hezbollah action,” Abrams said, referring to the Lebanese group seen as Tehran’s most powerful military proxy.

“They have many other ways to respond… for example by trying to blow up an Israeli embassy,” he added.

Iran could also respond by accelerating its nuclear program, which Tehran has ramped up since then-US president Donald Trump in 2018 abandoned the 2015 Iran nuclear deal designed to constrain it in return for economic benefits.

But the two most dramatic steps — increasing the purity of its enriched uranium to 90 percent, which is considered bomb grade, or reviving work to design an actual weapon — could backfire and invite Israeli or US strikes.

“Either one of those would be viewed by Israel and by the US as a decision to acquire a bomb. So… they are really taking a big risk. Are they ready to do it? I would not think so,”

“In this highly tense regional situation, it is imperative to show utmost restraint,” Peter Stano,

at a destroyed building allegedly struck by Israeli jets in Damascus, Syria, Monday, April 1, 2024. (SANA via AP)

The European Union on Wednesday condemned an [airstrike on the Iranian embassy](https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-iranian-irgc-commander-said-killed-in-alleged-israeli-strike-on-damascus/) in Damascus on April 1 that killed seven people and called on countries in the region to show restraint.

Iran blamed Israel for the attack, which killed two of its generals and five military advisers at its embassy compound in Damascus. Israel has not claimed responsibility for the strike, one of the most significant yet on Iranian interests in Syria.

“In this highly tense regional situation, it is imperative to show utmost restraint,” Peter Stano, a spokesperson for the executive European Commission, said in a post on X.

“The principle of the inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises and personnel must be respected in all cases and in all circumstances in accordance with international law.”

Iran has avoided direct conflict with Israel during the half-year war against Hamas in Gaza while supporting its allies’ attacks on Israeli and US targets

“Dozens of bodies, some of them decomposed, have been recovered from in and around the Shifa medical complex,” the Hamas-run health ministry said in a statemen

The Israeli military “withdrew from the Shifa medical complex after burning down the complex buildings and putting it completely out of service,” the ministry run by the terror group said, adding that “the scale of the destruction inside the complex and the buildings around it is very large.”

“No hospital in the world looks like this. This is what a house of terrorists looks like,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at a Sunday news conference. Some 350 patients and medical staff at Shifa Hospital were evacuated by the IDF to a “designated compound” in another part of the complex, where the military provided them with humanitarian aid and suppliesn central Gaza, the IDF said an attack helicopter carried out a strike two buildings used by Hamas, one of which was booby-trapped and had been used to observe Israeli troops.

In other airstrikes in Gaza, the IDF said it killed terror operatives who were an “immediate threat” to ground troops, including a sniper. In southern Gaza’s Khan Younis, the IDF said  troops of the Commando Brigade and Givati Brigade were continuing to battle Hamas in the al-Amal neighborhood. Amid the operation in al-Amal, troops killed numerous gunmen in close-quarters combat, detained terror suspects, and located weapons over the past day, the IDF said.

In another area of Khan Younis, the IDF said the 7th Armored Brigade and Israeli Air Force struck several Hamas targets, including a truck driving toward the troops and another car with operatives inside, which were perceived as threats.

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As fighting continued, the [US continued with efforts](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-top-aides-reportedly-to-hold-video-meeting-with-us-officials-on-rafah-op/) to stop a promised Israeli incursion into the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where more than 1.5 million displaced Palestinians are sheltering.

The United States and 47 other countries at the United Nations issued a statement Wednesday unequivocally condemning attacks on Israel by Iran “and its militant partners.”

An Iranian attack overnight Saturday-Sunday marked the first time Tehran has launched a direct military assault on Israel. Israeli authorities said Iran launched more than 300 drones and missiles, 99% of which were intercepted by air defenses in tandem with the US, Britain, France and Jordan.

The attack took place nearly two weeks after a suspected Israeli strike in Syria killed two Iranian generals and several others in a building in Damascus that Iran says was a consulate.

The 48 mainly Western countries also condemned the fact that the ballistic and cruise missiles and attack drones “violated the airspace of several regional states, putting at risk the lives of innocent people in those countries, and appeared to traverse airspace near the holy sites in Jerusalem.”

“We welcome the efforts to avert a further immediate escalation of violence in the region following the successful coordinated efforts to defend against Iran’s attack,” the statement said. “We call on all regional parties to take steps to avert further escalation of the situation.”

The countries further condemned Iran’s seizure of a Portuguese-flagged commercial ship near the Strait of Hormuz on Saturday and called for the immediate release of the ship and its crew. The ship’s operators [said Wednesday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/crew-of-ship-seized-by-iran-are-safe-though-still-captives-says-operator-msc/) the crew of the MSC Aries are safe but still captive.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reiterated his call for “maximum restraint” between Israel and Iran.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters that rhetoric in the Middle East is becoming “increasingly dangerous.” Dujarric said the world and the region “cannot afford another open conflict.”

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Israel has vowed revenge for the attack while its allies, including the US, are urging it to show restraint.

The US and other Western governments hope new economic sanctions against Iran will help persuade Israel to limit the scope of its retaliation.

European leaders have already [agreed to impose sanctions](https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-eu-leaders-meet-macron-says-they-must-work-to-expand-sanctions-on-iran/) on Iran’s missile and drone producers. The US has said it too will impose similar sanctions.

Both Israel and Iran have publicly kept up bellicose rhetoric since the missile attack.

Meanwhile, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi warned that the “tiniest invasion” by Israel would bring a “[massive and harsh](https://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-president-tiniest-invasion-by-israel-will-be-met-with-a-massive-response/)” response.

The strike in Damascus came against the background of near-daily attacks along Israel’s northern border with Lebanon by the Iran-backed Hezbollah terror group and Israeli retaliation to the assaults.

According to Channel 12 news, three ministers and several government legal experts held an “emergency discussion” at the Prime Minister’s Office on Tuesday about how to fend off the potential warrants

The television report said that during Tuesday’s discussion, which was attended by Katz, Justice Minister Yariv Levin and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, it was decided that Israel would reach out to the court and “diplomatic figures with influence” in an effort to prevent the warrants from being issued.

In February, a delegation of relatives of hostages being held by Hamas filed a war crimes complaint with the ICC against the terrorist organization’s leaders. The accusations in the filing included kidnapping, crimes of sexual violence, torture and other serious allegations.

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The court’s chief prosecutor, Karim Khan, visited Israel in December on an official trip, as Israel does not consider itself bound by the ICC. After touring some of the towns attacked by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and hearing testimonies from survivors, Khan said he had witnessed “scenes of calculated cruelty” and that it was clear to him the victims had been targeted because of their identities.

The report cited officials as saying that the success in stopping so many drones and missiles was due to Arab countries having passed on intelligence about the Iranian plan, as well as enabling the use of their airspace and providing radar tracking. In some cases, Arab militaries took an active role in intercepting the threats and “supplied their own forces to help” the report said, indicating that Jordan was not the only Arab nation to do so.

The full role played by Saudi Arabia and “other key Arab governments” is being kept quiet, according to the report.

However, eventually, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates agreed to privately pass on information while Jordan agreed to let the US and “other countries’ warplanes” use its airspace. Jordan also said it would use its own jets to intercept missiles and drones, the officials said.

As the attack became imminent, Washington ordered the deployment of aircraft and missile defense systems in the region and coordinated defense between Israel and Arab governments, a senior Israeli official told the Journal.

“The challenge was to bring all those countries around Israel” despite its regional isolation, the official said. “It was a diplomatic issue.”

Dana Stroul, who until December was the most senior civilian official at the Pentagon for the Middle East region, told the Journal that “Israel’s move into Centcom was a game changer” because it made it easier to share intelligence and provide early warning across countries.

The Israeli official who spoke to the Journal agreed, saying, “The Abraham Accords made the Middle East look different… because we could do things not just under the surface but above it. That’s what created this alliance.”

Another Israeli official involved in the regional security cooperation drive said that though intelligence has been shared in the past, the response to the Iran attack “was the first time that we saw the alliance work at full power.” “The Israelis clearly warned Assad that if Syria was used against them they would destroy his regime,” said a Western diplomat who requested anonymity because he is not allowed to speak to the media.

### Russia and UAE influence

“Russia and the United Arab Emirates have urged (Assad) to stay away from the conflict,” said Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute.

Last year, Syria returned to the Arab fold, seeking better ties with wealthy Gulf states, in hopes they can help fund reconstruction — although Western sanctions are likely to deter investment.

In 2018, the United Arab Emirates re-established ties with Syria, and it has been leading the charge to reintegrate Damascus.

Syria appears to have heeded Russia and the UAE’s call, and its border with the Golan Heights remains relatively calm despite a handful of strikes launched by Hezbollah-allied groups.

Most have landed in open areas, “which is read in Washington and elsewhere as a sort of code that Syrian President Bashar Assad wants to stay out of the Gaza conflict,” Tabler said.

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“Assad hopes the Arabs and the West will compensate him for his restraint, and the Russians are pushing him towards this path,” he said.

### Tricky Hamas ties

Earlier this month, Russia’s defense ministry said it had established an additional position in the Syrian part of the Golan, to “monitor the ceasefire and promote de-escalation.”

While massive demonstrations in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza took place in several Arab capitals, Damascus only saw a handful of small pro-Palestinian rallies, witnesses said.

Syria has had a difficult relationship with Hamas, whose October 7 onslaught on southern Israel triggered the war, with terrorists killing some 1,200 people and seizing 253 hostages, mostly civilians, many amid acts of brutality and sexual assault.

Hamas and Assad reconciled in 2022, a decade after the Palestinian terror group, long allied with Damascus, broke ties over its suppression of largely Sunni protests that triggered Syria’s civil war.

Hamas comes from the same ideological school as the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist group with origins in Egypt, which Syria considers to be terrorists.

“The regime hates Hamas and has no desire to support the Muslim Brotherhood, whose victory could only strengthen their friends in Syria,” the diplomat said.

Hamas announced last year the opening of a new page with the Syrian government, but Assad felt that it was still “too early” to talk about a return to normality.

According to the report, the opinion was distributed among “all decision-makers on the political level and in the security establishment.” The outlet did not report when the document was circulated. The IDF said in response that “this is an internal and classified document which presents the position of the officer only, and does not represent the official position of the IDF.”