



THE GAZA war has brought friends Ahmad abu Alezz, left, and Mohammad Al Farra closer. “We calm each other down,” Al Farra says.

Anguish, guilt in the West Bank

With family members trapped in the nearby but blocked-off Gaza Strip, two Palestinian friends hold each other up amid the crushing grief

Story by Kate Linthicum | Photographs by Marcus Yam
REPORTING FROM RAMALLAH, WEST BANK

Since the war began, two friends have spent most evenings holed up at the Ramallah television studio where one of them works.

They remain long after the nightly news has taped and most of the staff has departed, chain-smoking cigarettes and talking about the only thing that matters: Gaza.

Both men have families who are trapped there. Ahmad abu Alezz's four sons are crammed into tents in the southern city of Rafah. Mohammad Al Farra's parents are camped in the nearby town of Al Mawasi.

At least that's what he hopes. It has been six weeks since Al Farra's mother or father answered one of his messages. Each day he scans lists of the latest victims of the Israel-



A BOY on the edge of Ramallah, West Bank, heads to a trash bin overlooking the Qalandiya checkpoint to Jerusalem.

Hamas war, praying he won't find their names.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank, territories that Palestinians claim for their future state, are separated by some 25 miles. But they are worlds apart.

Since 2007, when Hamas seized control in Gaza, an Israeli blockade on the territory has almost completely curtailed Palestinians' ability to move between the two regions, and residents from each area have led increasingly disconnected lives.

The war in Gaza has exacerbated that sense of distance, with periodic power outages and scarce internet leaving people there more cut off than ever from the outside world. In the West Bank, where news channels feature constant coverage [See **Palestinians**, A4]

Liberal S.F. to get tough on drug crimes

Facing a crisis, the city will consider murder charges for dealers in fatal opioid overdoses.

By Hannah Wiley

SAN FRANCISCO — County by county in California, as fentanyl overdoses escalate, local prosecutors are turning to a novel legal strategy to stem the spiraling death toll: charging drug dealers with murder.

In July, Placer County reached a landmark plea deal that sent a man to prison for 15 years to life on charges of second-degree murder after he provided a Roseville teenager with a fentanyl-contaminated pill that proved lethal.

A month later, a Riverside County jury issued a first-of-its-kind verdict against a man who supplied a lethal dose of a fentanyl-laced pill to a 26-year-old woman. He also was found guilty of second-degree murder and sentenced to at least 15 years in prison.

District attorneys in Sacramento, Fresno, San Joaquin, San Bernardino and San Diego counties are using similar blueprints: going after alleged fentanyl dealers for homicide rather than drug sales, in hopes that the threat of harsher criminal penalties will ease an opioid crisis that killed more than 7,300 Californians in 2022.

Many of the counties adopting the aggressive legal strategy are in “purple” or “red” areas of California, where more conservative law enforcement leaders have long embraced a tough-on-crime philosophy. Now, San Francisco city leaders — famous for their ultraliberal politics — are preparing to follow suit.

Mayor London Breed, police officials and Dist. Atty. Brooke Jenkins are in [See **Fentanyl**, A7]

The FBI source accused of lying about the Bidens

Alexander Smirnov's quiet L.A. suburban life masked Kremlin ties and seven-figure bank accounts.

By Matt Hamilton

He rubbed elbows with Russian elites, spoke of an exclusive invite aboard an oligarch's mega-yacht and cozied up to foreign intelligence agencies.

As a valued FBI informant for the last 13 years, Alexander Smirnov hopped the globe to sweep up information on powerful figures and illicit activities. Federal agents even authorized him to break the law while doing so.

For much of this time, Smirnov, 43, also lived a quiet, seemingly unremarkable life in the suburbs of Los Angeles with a long-term girl-

friend 15 years his senior, calling Calabasas, Woodland Hills and Orange County home.

“They were very, very secretive,” a former landlord said. “They packed really, really quick and left. It was weird.”

Smirnov's tenure as a confidential source for the FBI ended in spectacular fashion this month, with a grand jury in L.A. charging him with obstructing justice and lying to federal agents.

The lies, according to prosecutors, included an explosive allegation that has been central to Republican efforts to impeach President Biden and bolster Donald Trump's campaign to return to power — that Biden and son Hunter each accepted \$5 million in bribes from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The falsehoods that Smirnov shared with his FBI handler in 2020, coupled [See **Informant**, A8]

Kayakers, dip your paddles in Death Valley



A KAYAKER on Lake Manly in Death Valley National Park's Badwater Basin. The lake is shallow, but deep enough to buoy a small watercraft for the time being.

MICHAEL KOHLER / National Park Service

Newsom unveils abortion rights ad

Governor's campaign takes aim at travel restrictions for the procedure in several red states. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Theory doesn't hold water

Conspiracy peddlers blame a regional agency and cloud seeding for recent heavy storms. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

UCLA's Cronin makes last pitch

Basketball coach tries to salvage Bruins' season in an attempt to motivate his players, writes Dylan Hernández. **SPORTS, D5**

Weather

A shower or two. L.A. Basin: 64/52. **B6**



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