

Army withdraws troops from southern Gaza; four soldiers killed

Yaniv Kubovich

The army withdrew its last ground troops from southern Gaza on Sunday morning, four months after the incursion into Khan Yunis began, and the same day it announced one of its highest single-day death tolls in weeks.

Four soldiers were killed in combat operations in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday, according to the army's statement. The soldiers were part of the IDF's Commando Brigade and were identified by the army as Capt. Ido Baruch, 20, from Tel Mond; Sgt. Amitai Even Shoshan, 20, from Azriel; Sgt. Reef Harush, 20, from Ramat David; and Sgt. Ilai Zair, 20, from Kedar.

Regarding the withdrawal, the army said it had "taken full advantage of the intelligence and combat" in the area, and denied that the reason for the pullout was a demand by the United States. From now on, Israeli forces are expected to concentrate on targeted raids in the area, while regular ground operations will continue in Gaza's north.

An army official discussed the withdrawal saying, "It doesn't make sense for us to stay there now. We intend to go in where needed and to create operational opportunities, and not to be in the field unnecessarily. The 98th Division crushed the [Hamas] brigades in Khan Yunis and killed thousands of terrorists. Anything that could have been done there, we have done."

The forces from the 98th Division, including the



The funeral of Sgt. Reef Harush, 20, from Ramat David, on Sunday.

Rami Shilush

Commando Brigade, the Givati Brigade and the 7th Armored Brigade, have left the area south of the Gaza River. The Nahal Brigade, which operates as part of the 162nd Division, remains in the north, guarding the corridor bisecting Gaza.

The official added that

the army's withdrawal from Khan Yunis will enable displaced persons to return to it from Rafah, but also that "we will continue to operate there according to operational demands. Our plans are not confined just to Rafah. We are preparing for combat there, but awaiting the approval

from the government." He also mentioned the need to refresh the troops, vehicles and weaponry.

"The mission was to destroy the Khan Yunis brigade and that was accomplished," he said. "The second mission was to bring the hostages back, and there we did not

succeed. The operation in Al Shifa influenced the decision to alter the approach in southern Gaza."

The IDF says that three divisions will soon be posted along the Gaza border, and will be sent into Gaza for operations as needed. Forces will no longer remain on the

Kissufim corridor either.

Following the report about the withdrawal of ground troops from Gaza, The Hostages and Missing Families Forum issued a statement saying, "The government's decision to withdraw the

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One step away from victory, really?

Saturday night, the last Israeli soldiers left Khan Yunis. After four months, the military operation in this city, the army's second largest since the war began, has ended. Thus the four soldiers from the Commando Brigade who fell in a clash with armed men Saturday afternoon were the last Israeli casualties in this phase of the fighting.

Effectively, the Israel Defense Forces no longer has any ground troops in the southern Gaza Strip. One brigade combat team remains in the corridor that severs northern Gaza from southern Gaza. A few other brigades are stationed just outside Gaza and will enter as needed.

The IDF, and especially Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, are now highlighting the achievements of the Khan Yunis campaign - destroying a significant portion of Hamas' territorial brigades in that area, killing thousands of Hamas members and hitting command posts. This coincides with the publication of statistics for the first six months of the war. (The army thinks it has killed around 12,000 terrorists, which seems exaggerated.)

But it's worth noting that so far, the two main goals of the Khan Yunis operation haven't been achieved. The two top Hamas officials in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif, remain at large. Nor has any breakthrough occurred in the hunt for the Israeli hostages held in Gaza, aside from the rescue of two hostages in Rafah two months ago.

The IDF and Shin Bet did find tunnels where Sinwar hid during the war. In those tunnels they found Hamas command posts, Sinwar's personal documents and gear,

and cells and cages where the hostages had been held as human shields. Since then, he has apparently been moving among other hideouts in his complex deep under the ground of Khan Yunis.

It's reasonable to assume that Sinwar and Deif will eventually be killed or captured, given the effort being invested in this. Hamas' No. 3 in Gaza, Marwan Issa, was killed in an airstrike last month after he violated the rigid security protocols adopted by senior Hamas officials. It's even still possible that there could be a breakthrough in rescuing the hostages.

Why withdraw from S. Gaza?

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But the public should be told the truth: The enormous death and destruction the IDF is leaving behind in Gaza, alongside quite a few losses on our side, aren't currently bringing us any closer to achieving the war's goals. Hamas' military and governmental capabilities are gradually being degraded, but the organization isn't close to being defeated. We aren't one step away from victory, as Netanyahu once again claimed on Sunday with no basis in reality, to the dismay of officers and soldiers who, regardless of their political views, can spot the deception.

Where do we go from here? There are three possible scenarios: 1) Further escalation with Iran and Hezbollah due

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Officials unsure whether Hamas will ease hostage demands

Jonathan Lis

Israeli officials were hard-put Sunday to say whether the latest round of negotiations in Cairo could produce results, hoping that Hamas would ease its demands. The Israeli delegation, led by Mossad director David Barnea, arrived in Cairo Sunday ahead of talks led by CIA director William

Burns, Qatari ruler Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and the head of Egyptian intelligence, Abbas Kamel. It was due to return late Sunday, after press time.

"The Israeli negotiating team has [been given] significant rope to draft a proposal vis-a-vis Hamas," an Israeli diplomatic source said. "The problem isn't with us at the moment, but mainly on the

side of Hamas. It is not clear whether Hamas is ready to negotiate." According to him, "So far, Hamas has not agreed to be flexible on its conditions regarding ending the fighting or the return of residents to northern Gaza and has not agreed to contend with Israel's red lines."

Israel is "a step away from victory," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said

during the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem Sunday, adding: "It is not Israel that is preventing a [hostage] deal. Hamas is preventing a deal."

This week's talks come amid reports of a possible humanitarian truce and the significant withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Gaza on Sunday. Reports in Qatar quoted Egyptian

sources as saying that they expect a humanitarian pause in the fighting during the Eid al-Fitr holiday, which is expected either on Tuesday or Wednesday.

Israeli officials have also pointed out the direct pressure that is being exerted by U.S. President Joe Biden to reach a deal, especially during his conversation last week with Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu. Despite all this, a different Israeli source said Sunday, "I don't know the basis for the optimism in the reports about the possibility of reaching an agreement soon."

The diplomatic source said: "It is clear why Hamas is dragging its feet in the negotiations: It sees that [Israeli] forces are withdrawing from the Strip even without

receiving anything in return from the organization, and the humanitarian aid is increasing. ... [Hamas] is not eager to lose the hostages, who are the guarantee for the physical survival of Hamas' leaders, for the release of prisoners."

The United States was expected to offer a new proposal on Sunday including a demand for both sides to be

significantly more flexible. The Biden administration ramped up its efforts to close a deal and put great pressure on both sides and the mediators. "The significant involvement of the United States and the heavy pressure its applying could break the negotiation logjam," an Israeli official said.

With reporting from Jack Khoury.

Grief gives way as hostage's fate emerges

Kibbutz member's killing in captivity drives survivors to rage



Moshe at a demonstration in Kiryat Gat, Saturday. Ilan Assayag

Nir Hasson

"Community of Nir Oz survivors" is what displaced residents of the kibbutz that lost one-quarter of its members October 7 - slaughtered or taken hostage - call themselves. Since moving to the Karmei Gat neighborhood in Kiryat Gat about three months ago, they rarely meet as a community. The common dining hall they were promised is still under construction, in the field across from the apartment buildings where most of the survivors live. The adults meet in an apartment set aside for their use,

but it can't hold everyone. For now, they make do with chance meetings in the elevator or the lobby.

On Saturday they all met for the first time since the move. They gathered in the parking lot, near the future dining hall, for their first demonstration demanding the hostages' return: 36 members of their kibbutz are still being held in Gaza, 26 of whom are thought to still be alive. At noon, a few hours before the demonstration, the community was informed of the killing of another member, Elad Katzir, whose body was returned to Israel at the end of the week.

His death is a heavy blow to the community, which has already stopped counting the blows it has absorbed. Up to now the community has focused on dealing with its shock, grief and pain. Saturday the first signs of rage appeared.

The remarks of Adina Moshe, who was abducted October 7 and released in late November and had been Katzir's caregiver when he was very young, express that rage. "My Elad, yes he was mine, I took care of him

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Marc Israel Sellen

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In Alabama, exposing the complex history of Jews in the civil rights era

Judy Maltz

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama - There were the rabbis who joined Martin Luther King, Jr. on the famous march from Selma to Montgomery, the Jewish students who helped register Black voters in Mississippi, the Jewish Freedom Riders who fought bus segregation in the South, and the Jewish social justice activists who helped found and fund the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

These often-cited examples of activism have helped shape the overwhelmingly positive narrative about the role Jewish-Americans played in the Black civil rights movement. But not all Jews in America, especially those living in the South, were necessarily on board.

In the spring of 1963, for example, a delegation of angry Jewish community leaders in Birmingham confronted 19 Conservative rabbis who had arrived to show their support for the Black civil rights movement at the airport and begged them to turn back. The Birmingham contingent warned the rabbis that their actions would incite antisemitism and compromise the safety of the local community.



Margaret Norman, Temple Beth-El's director of programming and engagement.

Amit Schejter

This was not just paranoia. Five years earlier, 54 sticks of dynamite were planted in one of the window wells of Temple Beth-El, the city's Conservative congregation. The dynamite was lit, but miraculously never detonated. It was discovered by an 18-year-old Black janitor, who reported it to police.

It wasn't that Temple Beth-El was especially active in the battle for racial desegregation. But because white seg-

regationists tended to view the civil rights movement as a conspiracy concocted by Jews and communists, the congregation was considered guilty by association. It was among several synagogues in the South targeted by bombings in those years. It helps explain why southern Jews tended to be less active in the civil rights movement than Jews in the already desegregated North.

A new project launched by

Temple Beth-El aims to shed light on the unique challenges faced by Jews in Birmingham during this tumultuous period in American history.

"The Beth-El Civil Rights Experience," which opened in late October, combines an exhibit on the premises of the nearly 100-year-old synagogue with a self-guided audio tour of sites of significance in Birmingham's

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