

TUESDAY, APRIL 9, 2024 ■ 1 NISAN, 5784



Bring them home
Rom Braslavski,
kidnapped from the
Nova music festival

The Diaspora's dilemma
American rabbis
grapple with Israel's war
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'The First Omen'
A film that does not shy away
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Israel in limbo after Khan Yunis pullout

ANALYSIS

• By HERB KEINON

At the six-month mark on Sunday of Israel's longest war since 1948, the country – taking stock of gains and losses since October 7 – heard the news that the IDF pulled out its last division from Khan Yunis, leaving only a brigade and scattered commando units inside the Gaza Strip.

The news was broadcast as part of one of the day's regular hourly news bulletins, not during a specially-called press conference or video statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that one may have expected given the drama of the announcement.

Further, there was no build-up to it; no signal that it was about to happen.

One minute the ground maneuver in Khan Yunis was still ongoing – four soldiers were killed in an ambush near the city on Saturday – the next it was over.

One brigade – the Nahal Brigade – was left of the five and a half divisions, between 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers, that were inside Gaza at the peak of the fighting in December. The Nahal Brigade is patrolling the road bisecting the strip from east to west to keep Gazans pushed south at the beginning of the war from returning to the northern part of the coastal strip.

"Is the war over?" many asked on Sunday, while others – cognizant of the heightened tension in the north – asked instead: "Is it over in Gaza?"

After months of saying that Israel would not stop fighting in Gaza until Hamas was defeated and the hostages were released, was this sudden announcement the result of US President Joe Biden's angry call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday, since the hostages were not returned

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US: We're waiting for Hamas's formal reply

A new hostage deal proposal is on the table, official response may take days



POPE FRANCIS meets families of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, at the Vatican yesterday. (Vatican/Reuters)

• By TOVAH LAZAROFF

American and Israeli negotiators are waiting for a response from Hamas to the latest proposal on the table for a hostage deal, US National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby told reporters in Washington on Monday.

"Where we are now is that a proposal has been presented to Hamas and we're waiting on Hamas's response," Kirby said.

"A response from Hamas to any particular proposal one way or another can often take a matter of days just because of the nature of communications with them and with [Hamas Gaza leader Yahya] Sinwar," Kirby stated.

He spoke as Cairo hosted indirect talks between Israel and Hamas, which included CIA Director William Burns, as well as delegations from the two mediating countries Egypt and Qatar.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan is scheduled to meet with families of the hostages late Monday, Kirby added.

The Cairo talks were serious, he stressed, and could hopefully lead to a six-week pause in the war.

"We're taking this very, very seriously. And we want to do it as soon as possible because again, with that hostage deal comes a ceasefire of hopefully around six weeks," Kirby stated.

Sources told the Egyptian state-run Al-Qahera News said that delegations left Cairo and consultations were expected to continue within 48 hours. The security cabinet is expected to meet on Tuesday night to discuss the hostages.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a short Hebrew language video in which he said, "I received a detailed report on the talks in Cairo."

"We are working all the time to achieve our goals, primarily the release of all our hostages and achieving a complete victory over Hamas," he stated.

ISRAEL AT WAR



Six months later, question of trials for Oct. 7 killers remains unsolved,
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'Normalize the Intifada': Rutgers president, Jewish students flee meeting,
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In an unusual statement, the Prime Minister's Office also discussed the movements of Brig.-Gen. (Res) Gal Hirsch, explaining that he had met with the special US presidential envoy for hostage affairs, Roger Carstens.

They discussed US efforts to return the hostages, as well as American assistance toward achieving this goal, the Prime Minister's Office said.

Foreign Minister Israel Katz visited Italy on Monday with a delegation of relatives of some of the hostages. Those relatives were able to have an audience with Pope Francis.

According to a report in London-based *Al Araby Al Jadid*, the deal, proposed by the US, would include the return of 6,000 Palestinians to the northern part of Gaza on a daily basis during a six-week period as well as the release of 40 of the hostages.

Hamas has insisted that any deal must include a permanent ceasefire, but according to *Al Araby*, the pause to the war at this phase would not be permanent.

In a conversation with newly recruited soldiers to the armored and engineering corps, Defense Minister Yoav Galant [Likud] said that the IDF had proved itself in the battle against Hamas and could now afford to be flexible to make a deal for the

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Netanyahu pushes back at US, sets date for Rafah

• By TOVAH LAZAROFF

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu set a date for an IDF operation in Rafah to destroy the remaining Hamas battalions, as the United States reiterated its opposition to such a step, which it fears will create a humanitarian disaster.

"This victory requires entering Rafah and eliminating the terrorist battalions there. This will happen; there is a date," Netanyahu said in a brief video message he issued to the public on Monday night.

He spoke after the IDF removed Brigade 98 from Gaza, a move believed to be necessary so the troops could rest and regroup in advance of any further military activity in the enclave.

It sparked speculation, however, that Israel had decided not to send the IDF into Rafah. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir threatened to leave the government if the IDF did not enter Rafah or if it prematurely ended the war.

Israel has insisted that it can not oust Hamas from Gaza without such an operation.

US National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby told reporters that "we have consistently made

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Ben-Gvir: Gov't will fall without Rafah operation

• By ELIAV BREUER

Far-right ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich criticized Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday over the IDF's scaling back troops from Gaza and reports that Israel is willing to make concessions in a hostage deal that it had not been willing to make previously.

Ben-Gvir, who is Israel's National Security Minister, stated in a post on X, formerly Twitter, that if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ends Israel's war against Hamas without an extensive attack on Hamas in Rafah, he will "cease to have a mandate to serve as prime minister."

Smotrich, Israel's Finance Minister, summoned his party members for consultations on Monday over what he described as "reports over a general deal to end the war without defeating Hamas."

Smotrich later on Monday demanded in a letter that Netanyahu immediately convene Israel's National Security Cabinet, the statutory body with the authority to make policy decisions regarding the war. According to Smotrich, "The only forum that is authorized to make decisive decisions during wartime is the broad [National Security] cabinet, but unfortunately, this is not how

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'Foreign doctors will not solve Israel's impending crisis'

• By MICHAEL STARR and EVE YOUNG

Hundreds of French doctors attended a medical aliyah exposition in Paris last week as part of a joint endeavor by the Health Ministry, the Aliyah and Immigration Ministry, and Nefesh B'Nefesh (NBN) to bring more physicians to Israel. The program was part of a national effort to alleviate Israel's doctor shortage.

Due to regulation changes and the anticipated retirement of doctors who immigrated from the former Soviet Union and are aging, the shortage will be imminently greater. NBN co-founder Tony Gelbart said that Israel

was facing a "perfect storm" of factors contributing to this shortage, including these physicians' approaching retirement.

Not enough medical students are graduating in Israel, Gelbart said, adding that there are few slots in medical schools in the country. As a result, numerous aspiring medical students have been studying abroad, but many of those institutions, such as in eastern Europe, cannot give them certification in Israel. A 2019 reform eliminated many of those schools from the list that authorizes graduates to practice medicine in Israel.

Currently, some 34% of doctors entering the Israeli medical system have studied at the now-unauthorized schools, according to Rachel Berner Shalem, the Health Ministry's deputy head of



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Gazan family clings to destroyed home after IDF exit

• By DOAA ROUQA

GAZA (Reuters) – When Israeli forces withdrew from Khan Yunis, the Al-Najjar family braced for the worst before returning to southern Gaza City, where their house was obliterated by an Israeli airstrike in the war against Hamas.

Viewing the destruction of their home, they expected more uncertainty brought by the now-six-month-old conflict with no sign of a ceasefire as a humanitarian crisis squeezes the population, which could face famine.

Umm Eyad al-Najjar, who once lived in a comfortable home with her husband, daughter, and grandchildren, said the family will set up a tent.

"How can we endure that? There's no water or anything. I can't eat like I used to," she said. "You know how it is in the tents. We're surrounded

by strangers, and our relatives aren't there to talk to... Everything is destroyed."

Many of her family members were killed, she said, and their bodies are still being uncovered. Every house has someone who has been killed or wounded, she added.

For now, Umm Eyad said she plans to just sit in front of her house as the war keeps raging.

The war began when Hamas, which runs Gaza, burst into Israel on October 7, killed over 1,200 people, and dragged more 253 hostages back to Gaza. The act broke an existing ceasefire and prompted the offensive from Israel, which has vowed to return the hostages and dismantle the terror group's military capabilities.

Hamas-run health authorities in Gaza claim the bombardment has killed 33,000

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Prosecution: Ex-top PM aide in violation of witness deal

Explosive development could upend many of trial's expectations

• By YONAH JEREMY BOB

The Economic Crimes Division announced a shocking decision to declare Shlomo Filber, a former top aide to Benjamin Netanyahu and the state's witness against the prime minister, in violation of his immunity deal.

Prosecutor Yonatan Tadmor, in consultation with the attorney general and the State Attorney's Office, said he would prosecute Filber subject to a pre-indictment hearing. This could change the entire character of the media bribery and fraud trial against Netanyahu.

This means that one of the prosecution's top witnesses cannot be trusted, which could undermine its case against the prime minister and end the possibility of a bribery conviction, leaving only lesser charges intact.

In fact, in informal talks, the court previously suggest-



SHLOMO FILBER
(Amit Shabi/Pool)

walk where it would convince the court to believe Filber's anti-Netanyahu testimony but not his pro-Netanyahu testimony.

This would be a difficult pitch but it might hold water, given that Filber gave an extensive confession to police in 2018 about how he hadn't told the truth against the prime minister, as though out of a trance.

So, by the time Filber testified in March 2022, he already believed that Netanyahu would return to the premiership and that the prosecution's case against him and Netanyahu was weaker than it was in 2018, when he cut a deal.

Netanyahu's team will argue that Filber's attacks were to "save his skin" and that once he got deep into direct examination and cross-examination, he returned to tell the truth.

ed that the prosecution drop the bribery charge and focus on lesser charges, which it rejected.

Still, its decision to charge Filber could be an acknowledgment that his testimony tanked the bribery charge.

Conversely, the prosecution could still perform a tightrope

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