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Situation Assessment | 18 October 2023

Israel's "War Cabinet": What Does It Tell Us about Netanyahu's Plans for Gaza?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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Unit for Political Studies

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Five days since Hamas launched "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood" on 7 October 2023, targeting Israeli military sites and settlements in the area surrounding the Gaza Strip, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and opposition leader, Benny Gantz, announced the formation of a national emergency government. Under this agreement, five members of Gantz's National Unity camp joined the government, without obtaining ministerial portfolios, making a total of 38 ministers, the largest cabinet in the history of Israel. The next day, the Knesset approved the agreement, in accordance with which the security cabinet was expanded, to include the same National Unity MKs, Gantz, Gadi Eizenkot, Gideon Sa'ar and Hili Tropper as full members and Yifat Shasha-Biton as an observer, bringing the total members up to 15. The emergency government will continue to carry out its duties until the end of the war, which may last for months.

Forming a "War Cabinet"

The agreement stipulates that a "war cabinet" is to be formed, including Netanyahu, Gantz and the Defence Minister, Yoav Galant, in addition to two observer members, Gadi Eizenkot, from National Unity, and Ron Dermer, Likud's Minister of Strategic Affairs, who previously served as the Israeli ambassador to Washington (2013-2021) and whose principle mission seems to be to coordinate positions with the White House. Gantz conditioned his membership of the emergency government on the formation of said War Cabinet and the exclusion of National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich. Netanyahu stands widely accused of being responsible for the failure to prevent, or even confront, "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood". This unprecedented failure handed Gantz and Eizenkot, both of whom previously served as Army Chief of Staff, a mandate to play significant roles in the wartime decision process, to restore the confidence of Israelis in the government and military establishment. The cabinet will facilitate the decision-making process, with the number of participants in security cabinet meetings averaging 35-40 people, including, in addition to its members, ministers, the army chief of staff, and the head of National Security, security leaders, the military secretary to the prime minister, and military commanders. Membership of the political and security cabinet is also influenced by partisan considerations, and most of its members do not have the military and political background necessary to make decisions related to war and national security.

The agreement between Netanyahu and Gantz stipulates that the War Cabinet hold at least one meeting every 48 hours, determines the military objectives in Gaza and related decisions. It is then to present those decisions to the security cabinet for discussion and approval. Given the scale of the Hamas operation, the emergency government has been granted an extensive mandate to make war related decisions.

The military establishment, by virtue of number, has the greatest influence in the "war cabinet", including the Minister of Defence, Yoav Galant, a former general known for his extremist positions who served as commander of the southern front in the Israeli army, and who led the war on Gaza in



from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009. Gantz himself served as Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army from 2011 to 2015, and led two wars on Gaza, one in November 2012, which lasted a full week, and another in July-August 2014, which lasted 53 days.

Likewise, Eizenkot served as Chief of Staff of the Israeli army from 2015- 2019. In an attempt to improve the Israeli infantry, he established the 89th “Oz” Brigade, which consists of three special forces units: Unit 212 – Maglan; Unit 217 – Duvdevan; and Unit 621 – Egoz. Also participating in the War Cabinet is the serving Chief of Staff, Herzi Halevi, appointed in 2022 under the recommendation of Gantz when he was Security Minister in Yair Lapid’s cabinet. Halevi also headed the military intelligence directorate (Aman) from 2014-2018, where he developed the coordination and cooperation between the three branches of Israeli intelligence agencies, Aman, Shin Bet/Shabak, and Mossad. He has experience as a Paratrooper and in special operations.

Ground Invasion

On 14 October, the War Cabinet decided to launch a ground offensive in the Gaza Strip, without determining the date of the invasion, nor any precise military objective. Nevertheless, it has repeatedly stressed that it seeks the complete elimination of Hamas and its rule from Gaza.

Perhaps the most important consideration for the War Cabinet’s decision to launch a ground invasion is the potential human loss for the Israeli army upon entering into urban warfare against Hamas, which has already managed to kill 290 from the Israeli Military and Intelligence establishment, including senior officers and special forces, according to the Israeli army itself. Additionally, different Israeli reports have claimed the infantry is not sufficiently prepared for a ground invasion. The fears of the War Cabinet regarding potentially huge human losses for the Israeli army in a ground invasion led it to take several decisions and directives to govern its offensive:

1. Utilizing the air force, artillery, and tanks in its bombardment of the Gaza Strip, through a scorched earth policy, or carpet bombing in military terms.
2. Using air strikes to massacre Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip, especially north of, and inside, Gaza City, in order to force the Palestinian civilians to evacuate and move to the south of the city, as the Israeli army has publicly demanded in recent days.
3. Unprecedented bombardment concentrated on Gaza City and its northern surroundings, before a ground attack, using heavy US bombs weighing at least a ton, in order to destroy the Palestinian resistance command and control in and north of Gaza city, in addition to destroying the tunnel network, and cutting communication between the resistance military units.
4. A ground invasion in coordination with the Commando Special Forces in the Israeli army targeting Palestinian resistance sites in Gaza City, and other places in the Gaza Strip, with coordination between the various Israeli military intelligence and cyber security services to determine the



locations of the targets, and between the invading commando forces reinforced with air strikes, artillery and tanks.

5. Taking further precautions such as addressing the shortage of protective armour for soldiers, through manufacture and supply, continuing the evacuation of settlements and towns along the border with the Gaza Strip, and training ground forces on how to engage in urban warfare, especially in places crowded with rubble and destroyed buildings.

Differences within the War Cabinet

The War Cabinet has not yet determined its military objectives, likely fearing a second failure, should it fail to meet them, in addition to differences between its members, especially between Netanyahu and the military establishment. The dispute goes even deeper, whereby the military establishment doubts the seriousness of Netanyahu's desire to eliminate Hamas' rule. Moreover, the question of who is to blame for the unprecedented security failure of historic proportions, in terms of both intelligence and counter-attack arouses further discord. Netanyahu is trying to shift the blame for 7 October onto the military and security establishment, especially Halevi and Galant. Netanyahu and his remaining followers are consequently calling for the need to close ranks and postpone any debate or internal conflict until after the war.

While Halevi, on 12 October, recognized that the Israeli forces did not meet its obligations on 7 October to protect the state or its citizens, Netanyahu made no such admissions, insisting that he was not responsible for what happened and claiming he had no idea about Hamas' operation until it had already happened. In the context of this conflict, Netanyahu's critics, especially in the military, directed a comprehensive and unified attack on the prime minister, unlike any seen against a wartime leader, blaming him for failings in the lead up to and aftermath of the attack, and demanding his resignation.

In this context, each camp engaged in a series of leaks, seeking to embarrass the other. News was leaked that Egyptian intelligence had warned Netanyahu's office, days before "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood", that the Palestinian resistance in Gaza was preparing to launch a large-scale attack on Israel, but Netanyahu's office, and Netanyahu himself, ignored the warning. At the same time, Israeli media published news that the security and military establishment had received information indicating that Hamas might launch an attack on Israel the night of the attack, but neither sufficiently verified the matter, nor did they take appropriate measures to confront the attack.

Conclusion

Israel is prepared to launch a ground invasion of Gaza in order to eliminate the Palestinian resistance, making Palestinians to pay the price of resisting the occupation. But the Israeli army also fears the consequences of this operation and the human losses it is likely to incur in the face of a defiant



resistance force experienced and trained in protracted urban warfare, in addition to possessing a network of tunnels that have been estimated to extend up to 500km (although these estimates may be exaggerated). Consequently, the Israeli offensive will likely proceed slowly in order to minimize losses, and the war will probably be drawn out, unless a new front is opened to relieve pressure on Gaza. Israeli military and security officials still believe that Hezbollah is not seeking to enter into a comprehensive war with Israel, despite pressure. It will thus avoid any attacks over the Lebanese border and try to maintain a policy of mutual deterrence, so as to focus all its efforts on achieving its objectives in Gaza. But these objectives will not be met with ease.