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# Netanyahu's Political Calculations and the Future of Israel's Emergency Government

Unit for Political Studies

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## Unit for Political Studies

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More than 140 days since Israel launched its genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government, political opposition, military establishment, and public opinion continues to support the war on Gaza, at least until the military achieves its declared goals to eliminate Hamas as a military power and governing body and recover the Israeli detainees. But the discrepancy between the extreme right-wing camp of Netanyahu and the opposition has begun to widen in recent weeks, with regard to the Israeli detainees held by Hamas. Of the 136 detainees, 34 have been declared dead by the Israeli army. While the anti-Netanyahu camp prioritizes a prisoner exchange deal with Hamas before it is too late, Netanyahu's camp is sacrificing the detainees to achieve the main goal of eradicating Hamas.

## Growing Extremism

In an attempt to improve his public image and enhance the popularity of his right-wing coalition in Israeli society, after suffering a huge blow on 7 October, Netanyahu started taking ever more extreme positions regarding the war on Gaza and the Palestine question. In this context Netanyahu began to talk of achieving total victory as a fundamental war goal, which requires protracted military action in the Gaza Strip, possibly for years to come. More than four months into the war, Netanyahu has proposed his plan for “the day after” in a brief document, reiterating his previous positions and emphasizing the need for continued and complete security control over the Strip, similar to its current occupation of the West Bank. It also suggests the construction of a security wall extending deep underground between Egypt and Gaza and rejects the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Strip in any capacity, the unification of the Gaza Strip with the West Bank, the continuation of UNRWA's institutional presence, or the establishment of a Palestinian state.<sup>1</sup> Netanyahu is resisting any pressure applied by the US to interact realistically with these issues, as well as cabinet pressure led by his partner in the emergency government, Benny Gantz.

In his quest to impose his own agenda, Netanyahu, who controls war strategy decision-making, relies on several sources of power, most notably the broad powers enjoyed by the prime minister in the Israeli political system, the extreme and fascist rightward shift in Israeli society, especially during this war, and the Israeli consensus in support of the war and to get revenge, making Palestinians “pay” for “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood”. Netanyahu's position is also bolstered by the continued cohesion of his camp behind him and unwavering US support for the continuation of the war until its goals are achieved. Moreover, the Arab states' response has been weak and they have failed to use any of their global influence to stop the war.

## Prisoner Exchange Negotiations

In recent weeks, Netanyahu has adopted more stringent positions in the indirect negotiations conducted with Hamas regarding the prisoner exchange deal. He refuses to make any concession

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<sup>1</sup> Yehonatan Lees, “Netanyahu Presented His Plan for the Next Day in the Gaza Strip: Disarming the Strip and Changing UNRWA,” *Haaretz*, 2/23/2024, accessed on 2/28/2024, at: <http://tinyurl.com/45w7s9t7> [Hebrew]



that would be considered a success for Hamas, especially the demand for a ceasefire. He fears that any stop to the fighting for a continued stretch will make it difficult to resume the fighting, especially if the US administration opposes a return to the military operation. Finally, Netanyahu fears the collapse of his government coalition if a prisoner exchange agreement is reached at the expense of one or both of the fascist parties, Otzma Yehudit led by Itamar Ben Gvir, and Religious Zionism led by Bezalel Smotrich.

Netanyahu is resisting pressure from US President Joe Biden to show flexibility in reaching an agreement that would allow the release of detainees, including US citizens, and similar efforts made by President Biden's aides, including Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and the head of the CIA, Bill Burns. Netanyahu retracted the framework agreement that was reached in Paris in early February 2024 for the exchange of prisoners<sup>2</sup> and rejected the framework proposal for the exchange of prisoners presented by the leaders of the military establishment, the head of the Shin Bet Intelligence, and the head of the Mossad.<sup>3</sup> He also prevented an Israeli security delegation from traveling to Cairo to continue negotiating the controversial points with Hamas regarding the Paris Framework Agreement<sup>4</sup> and reduced the powers of the prisoner exchange negotiating delegation that he sent to Cairo, which included the heads of the Shin Bet and Mossad, preventing them from doing more than listen to the proposals.<sup>5</sup>

Netanyahu alone made decisions related to the prisoner negotiations, without consulting opposition leaders in his emergency government, considered a violation of the coalition agreement. Nor did he consult the Minister of Defence, Yoav Galant, or the leaders of the military and security establishment.

## The position of the Military Establishment

Netanyahu rejects the negotiation framework proposal presented by the military and security institutions, which support a prisoner exchange deal, even if the price is a ceasefire for a few months, given that failure to reach a deal exacerbates the cracks in Israeli society. But the ability of these two institutions to exert pressure in this direction seems limited because they are subject to political constraints in making decisions related to national security. Although in the past they have exerted greater influence on the political leadership to urge it to accept certain security decisions, they are not currently exerting sufficient pressure on the government to accept a prisoner exchange deal that includes a ceasefire. Any extended ceasefire may open the door to multiple investigations, including the formation of an official inquiry into failures that took place on 7 October, and also because the

<sup>2</sup> Amos Harel, "The tactical achievements in the Gaza Strip are exciting, but without a political goal they remain symbolic," Haaretz, 16/2/2024, accessed 28/2/2024, at: <http://tinyurl.com/yck5rsmu> [in Hebrew]

<sup>3</sup> Ben Caspit, "Absolute Victory: Certainly," *Maariv*, (print), 16/2/2024.

<sup>4</sup> Yehonatan Lees, "Netanyahu canceled the delegation's travel to Cairo, families of detainees: they are sacrificing our loved ones," Haaretz, 14/2/2024, accessed 28/2/2024, at: <http://tinyurl.com/ytswp3nn>.

<sup>5</sup> Aharon Barnea, "Bibi No No," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Saturday supplement, (print), 16/2/2024. [Hebrew]

ceasefire may gradually lead to the resignation of most, if not all, the leaders within the military and security establishment. These leaders have committed themselves to taking responsibility for the negligence, with some publicly committing to resigning once the war is over.

This means that there is a common interest for the leaders of the two institutions and the Prime Minister in prolonging the war, in order to make as much progress as possible before the inquiries are opened, and to create as much space between the inquiries and 7 October as possible, in order to lessen the impact of the failure and negligence.

## Gantz and the Future of the Emergency Government

The last two weeks of February 2024 saw heightened tensions in the relationship between Netanyahu and his partners in government, opposition leaders, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot. This seems to be due to Netanyahu's attempts to push them out of the emergency government formed following "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood". Three months after its formation, Netanyahu began to violate the agreement under which the government was established by monopolizing the decision-making process in any prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas. He seems to have come to believe that he no longer needs this government or the acquiescence of the opposition leaders to legitimize his continuation of the war, which enjoys the support of an overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews. In addition, he wants to be free of the restrictions imposed by the opposition remaining in his government to attain absolute power in deciding the status of Gaza in the post-war period. This is because his vision conflicts with the vision of both Gantz and Eisenkot, which is closer to the US position. Netanyahu also has his own domestic calculations in this regard; he believes that the official camp remaining in the government coalition serves Gantz politically as his rival and main competitor in the upcoming Knesset elections.

Finally, it seems that Netanyahu is seeking to convince the former leader of the Likud Party, Gideon Sa'ar, and his New Hope party, which ran in the last Knesset elections in the opposition bloc, and has four seats in the current Knesset, and is no less right-wing or extremist than Netanyahu, to remain in the government coalition after the departure of Gantz and Eisenkot's camp, so that the coalition will then be based on 68 members of Parliament and be in a better position within the Knesset than was the case before 7 October.<sup>6</sup>

Gantz and Eisenkot are aware of Netanyahu's desire to push them out of the government coalition and suspend the emergency government, and their resistance requires them to participate in decision-making to reap political gains. The war on the Gaza Strip is not over yet – the Battle of Khan Yunis is ongoing, while the war cabinet is turning towards Rafah, a campaign that Gantz supports. He also calls for the occupation of the Philadelphi Corridor/Saladin Axis, on the border with Egypt and the construction of a solid security wall. If Netanyahu himself does not take the initiative to

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Caspit



dismiss Gantz and Eisenkot, it is likely that they will remain in the government until their presence becomes politically useless. At that point their departure will most likely take place in coordination with the Biden administration.

## The Rafah Dilemma

There is near consensus in Israel on the necessity of completing the military operation in the Gaza Strip, occupying Rafah, and controlling some of the camps and towns located in the central region of the Strip, such as the Nuseirat camp and Deir al-Balah. However, several obstacles face the advance on Rafah, where about 1.5 million Palestinians are seeking shelter, about 1.2 million of whom have been displaced from the northern and central Gaza Strip and Khan Yunis. Any attack by the Israeli army on Rafah may end with a full-scale genocide, which has so far claimed the lives of about 30,000 Palestinians, as well as leaving at least 7,000 missing, and 70,000 seriously wounded. The assault would likely push Palestinians towards Sinai, and also kill the largest number of Israeli prisoners yet, a large portion of whom Israel believes are being held in Rafah. Accordingly, any military operation in Rafah draws intense international and regional scrutiny, especially from the Egypt and the US.

The US administration does not oppose Israel carrying out a military operation to occupy Rafah, but on the condition that it provides a clear and convincing plan to evacuate more than a million Palestinians from Rafah to other places in the Gaza Strip. Israel, which is preventing those displaced to Rafah from returning to their homes in the northern and central Gaza Strip before reaching a prisoner exchange deal, has proposed transferring more than a million Palestinians from Rafah to the Al-Mawasi area, which is located on the seashore in the southern Gaza Strip, west of Khan Yunis. However, this area is small and cannot accommodate hundreds of thousands of displaced people. The White House has thus objected to this plan, which Israel presented to the joint US-Israeli committee that meets daily in Tel Aviv to discuss the situation in Gaza, and it also does not seem enthusiastic about the plan that leaders in the Israeli army proposed in Washington.<sup>7</sup> This means that disputes over an Israeli military operation in Rafah have yet to be resolved and may be postponed for many months if a prisoner exchange agreement is reached in the coming weeks.

## Conclusion

More than four months into the Israeli onslaught in the Gaza Strip, Prime Minister Netanyahu, is in a position that enables him to disregard the emergency government and to take sole control over war strategy and decision-making and in drawing Israeli policies more generally. In his mission to maintain his rule, he has tended take positions more consistent with the extreme and fascist right in his camp. His direction is based not only on the rightward shift of Israeli society in its values and attitudes towards the right and the extreme right, but also on his confidence that the US administration will

<sup>7</sup> Amos Harel, "In spite of their statements, neither the government nor the army are enthusiastic about the operation in Rafah", *Haaretz*, 18/2/2024, accessed 28/2/2024, at: <http://tinyurl.com/5bhrnhbx> [Hebrew]



not take any measures to limit his aggressive extremism as the elections draw closer. Furthermore, most Arab countries have not taken any serious action against Israel, instead choosing to continue both their open and discrete relations with it in complete disregard of the genocide committed against the Palestinian people in Gaza.