

## HAARETZ

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## Save the hostages, Israel

The assassination of some of the children and grandchildren of Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas' political bureau, at the height of negotiations over a deal to free the hostages, could end up being a death sentence for the hostages. And if not for all of them, then at least for some of them – on the assumption that there ever was any chance for a deal that both sides appear to be working hard to thwart.

The assassination isn't expected to weaken Hamas or soften its negotiating positions, just as military pressure hasn't furthered the hostages' release. In fact, the assassination is only expected to bolster Haniyeh's position among his own people by shattering his image as someone who lives a life of luxury in Qatar, disconnected from his suffering people in the Gaza Strip.

Evidence of this can be found in Haniyeh's response after learning about the assassination. He quickly termed the deaths of his children and grandchildren as a blessing: the privilege of becoming martyrs. This, he added, proves his children didn't abandon their people in Gaza.

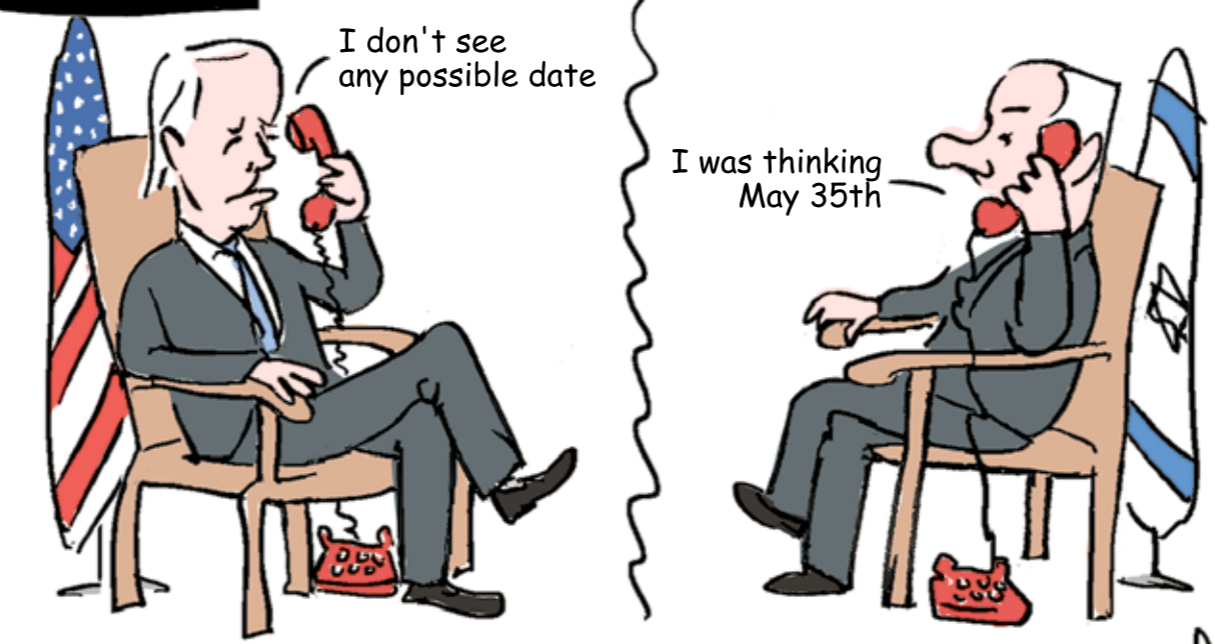
The public has no real way of knowing whether the defense establishment failed to inform the government and obtain its approval before the attack; whether it's true that not even the head of Southern Command, much less the military chief of staff, were informed of the attack in advance; or whether the person who approved the attack was the commander of Southern Command's targeting center, an officer with the rank of colonel. Trust in the system is so low that it's hard to accept the explanations that were given without a dose of skepticism.

If they are true, however, they attest to a rupture in the chain of command and a complete misunderstanding on the part of some army officers of the scope of the military's discretion in this country. This comes on top of a string of other reckless decisions, like bombing a university, employing the Hannibal Directive (which says the army can fire on terrorists who have seized hostages even if this risks the hostages' lives) and strikes on an international aid agency and journalists.

But regardless of whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered this strike or didn't even know about it, this is further proof of his manifold flaws and the danger that the continuation of his rotten government poses both to the lives of the hostages who are languishing in Gaza and to Israel's renewal.

If the public doesn't turn out en masse to demand that the people responsible for the rolling disaster they have brought down on Israel vacate their offices and give someone else a chance to salvage the situation, the country's future will be at risk, and so will the hostages' lives.

## RAFAH?



Eran Wolkowski | eranol@haaretz.co.il

Carolina Landsmann

## The hostages are the 'one step away from victory'

So just when the Americans finally explained it to Benjamin Netanyahu so he'll understand, and the IDF pulled out of Khan Yunis, allowing humanitarian aid to be brought in, Israel eliminated Ismail Haniyeh's sons and grandchildren. Just when one could feel a slight breath of hope – Israel, in practice, eliminated the hostages themselves.

This is so sick, what they did, such a maniacal action, so utterly screwed up, one begins to wonder whether this country is determined to really commit suicide, not just metaphorically. And no, it matters nothing that Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant were not briefed beforehand and were not the ones to give the go-ahead. That is, it would matter, of course, in a normal country. In a normal country, had something like this happened – that in the middle of a war, the army, on its own authority, had eliminated the sons and grandchildren of one of the enemy leaders without even briefing the government, then, then ... I don't even know how to complete this sentence. It's that implausible.

So now Netanyahu is pulling that old I-didn't-know,

I-wasn't-given-a-memo, nobody-held-me-by-the-lapel trick on us. But even if all that is true – who will believe that crook? And supposing it's true, that only means that not only did this government go off the rails, it also infected the IDF with its unique brand of madness, causing the IDF to become

If the Israeli public isn't ready to allow for the Hannibal Directive to be carried out on the hostages, because of Iran or whatever – now is the time to go berserk.

disoriented, or at least to have lost its way. The IDF is no longer capable, either, of distinguishing between soldiers and civilians, between war and war crime, between the military leadership and the political leadership, between adults and children, between us and the enemy. A tower of Babel, except that instead of everyone speaking a different language, everybody speaks the same language, one whose words are not even comprehensible to its speakers. Everything here is fucked up. Rotting. Sick.

And then the media starts pumping it out that Israel

fears the elimination will harm negotiations towards a deal, and you begin to think that everybody's laughing in your face. Who's afraid? The government, which doesn't want a deal? The military, which seemingly sabotaged the deal on its own authority? And everything is reported with such utter seriousness,

the reason Israel isn't winning, is what the sick right wing thinks. Or, to put it Bibi-ist terms: The hostages are what's preventing "Bibi" from leading Israel to total victory, they are jeopardizing his continued rule, is what Netanyahu, Sara and Yair Netanyahu think in their heart of rotten hearts.

And then you realize that the endless jibber-jabber on TV – the crying and wailing and addiction to looped eyewitness accounts, to voyeurism and heart-wrenching interviews with families and returned hostages, to wallowing in graphic descriptions of horrors and in how everybody hates us, and to self-pity – are all substitutes, like a pacifier, for the political, public and civil demand to free the hostages. And that is the juncture where the public at large cannot be absolved of responsibility. Pity and empathy will not bring back the hostages. The government listens to the public when the public screams. If the public isn't ready to allow for the Hannibal Directive to be carried out on the hostages, because of Rafah, because of Iran – now is the time to go berserk. Because the Hannibal Directive is what's happening now.

Samuel Heilman

## Don't expect a hostage deal from Netanyahu

Like many of my fellow Israelis, I am tired of the unending waves of hope for a deal on the hostages with Hamas, only to be followed by the inevitable disappointment when no agreement emerges.

I know, as do most of my fellow citizens, that our current government and especially our selfish prime minister do all they can to scotch all deals, always for their own egotistic political ends, but also because these so-called 'leaders' who failed to protect our security and our state, as was demonstrated on October 7, continue to have no idea what will cut the Gordian knot of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while they consistently fail us. Only their removal and replacement offer any hope. They have nothing else to offer.

Let's start at the top. We know that Netanyahu comes to work at relatively late hours of the morning, because he does not feel the pain of those he supposedly leads nor the urgency to end this war. Even during our national catastrophes and the outbreak of the war and still today, his workday starts very late – not before 10 A.M. and often at 11:00 A.M. or 12 noon

and sometimes at 1 P.M.

There is no sense of responsibility for his many failures on his part, and as seems obvious by now, he is dragging out the war to prevent the collapse of his fragile right-wing coalition, extend his time in office and stave off his conviction for corruption. If such mendacity were not enough, his decisions and those of his cabinet have created the conditions that make a hostage deal unlikely.

Hamas believes time is on the Palestinian side, as it watches Israel grow increasingly isolated.

First of all, he has alienated his friends in the Biden administration – starting with Israel's defender in chief in the White House – as well as those among the Democrats. He has managed to shift world opinion against us, and allow the denial of what happened in the brutal attack on us on October 7 to

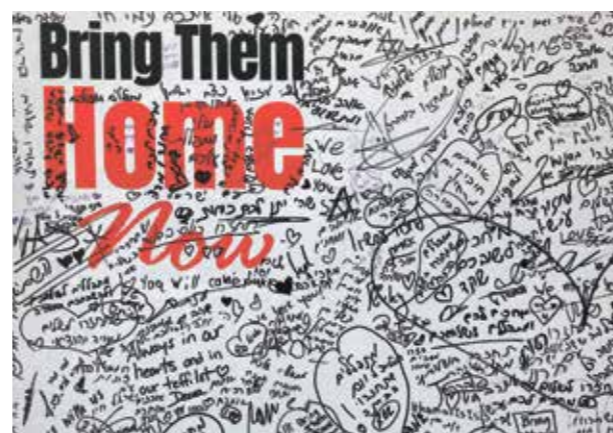
spread like a wildfire.

He has done so by his empty boasts and continued assertions that he will not stop the war until Hamas and its battalions are wiped out, an empty assertion, echoed by his failed defense minister and many others in the government.

He has done this without declaring who will take its place in running Gaza or leading the Palestinians. As a result, he effectively leaves Hamas as the sole controlling authority in Gaza, as we can see in that wherever Israeli forces have withdrawn, Hamas inevitably returns.

We saw that in Al-Shifa Hospital, and we see it in the way Hamas continues to commandeer the trucks entering Gaza with food aid. Although dressed in civilian clothing and masquerading as desperate civilians or criminal gangs, reports from the inside make clear that the men taking control of the aid and its distribution are actually Hamas members. For Hamas the continued desperation of Gaza citizens serves to maintain world pressure on Israel to increase aid and accede to its demands for a withdrawal of all troops.

By now, Israel is respond-



A board with messages in solidarity with hostages who were abducted on October 7, in Tel Aviv. Hannah McKay/Reuters

ing to the pressure upon it by allowing increased aid into Gaza, and by its effective withdrawal of nearly all combat troops from the Gazan front, without either announcing its plans for who will inherit control in Gaza or receiving any concessions from Hamas.

This effectively gave in to two of Hamas' major demands, while receiving nothing in return. Israel still has no Hamas-generated list of the names of the hostages still alive, no evidence about the physical welfare of those being held (in contravention of international law), and no real pressure point in any negotiations. They have

created the conditions for Hamas having no incentive to make a deal. Time appears to them to be on the Palestinian side, as they watch Israel becoming increasingly isolated.

In the meantime, because of having alienated its once stalwart allies, Israel continues to feel pressure from its erstwhile friends to end the war in a way that will leave them no more secure than they were on October 6. While the British, Canadians and the UN call for an embargo on arms shipments to Israel, and Turkey has halted trade and flights to Israel, the world pressure on Hamas and its allies He-

zbollah and Iran remains hard to find.

All this bodes ill for any deal, and time is not on the side of the hostages, who are being held in inhuman conditions by an organization whose concern with human suffering is expressed by its commitments to martyrdom, apocalypse and a fundamentalist conviction that God will ultimately bring them victory.

Alas, while Netanyahu's concern is only for himself, a significant part of his coalition is no less certain that God is on the Jews' side. This religious war has so far led to death, destruction and greater insecurity. We need a change now more than ever. We need a plan for who will control Gaza and lead the Palestinians, and who will do the same in Israel. Clearly, the ones still in charge will otherwise guarantee there is no deal for peace and security ahead, no return of the hostages and no future for these two peoples, who deserve better than they are getting.

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Eran Yashiv

## The Jewish republic of Israel

Wikipedia entry, April, 2048. Israel is a religious Jewish republic with a secular minority on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Its regime is currently theocratic and authoritarian. Israel's history as a state is relatively brief (100 years), though it is part of the long history of the Jewish people. Its official language is Hebrew.

National motto: *The Chosen People*

National anthem: *Ode to David*

Head of state: *State president*

Head of the executive branch: *State president*

State President: *Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (aged 72, grandson of the eponymous founder of the Shas party)*

Legislative Assembly: *The Sanhedrin*

Population: *15 million*

Demographics: *25% ultra-Orthodox Jews; 40% religious Jews; 15% secular Jews; 20% Muslims and Druze*

Brief survey of history, government, and the economy

In its first 75 years, Israel was a liberal Western state, facing three main challenges: attacks by Arab countries and various terrorist organizations in six wars and numerous smaller conflicts; assimilation of large waves of immigration coming from a wide variety of Jewish communities around the world; economic growth that raised it from a relatively poor country to a country in the top 20 ranked by GDP per capita.

In 2023, two major crises led to far-reaching changes in the state's character, its demographics and its economy. The first was a series of attempts at judicial and regime changes by an extreme right-wing government, inclusive of ultra-Orthodox parties, led by a populist politician, Benjamin Netanyahu. These attempted changes, which caused harm to Israel's democratic processes, resulted in widespread public protest. This protest and the state's Supreme Court put a stop to the planned judicial overhaul. But in the following decade, Israel underwent far-reaching changes, at first slowly and out of public attention, and later more quickly. The second crisis began on October 7, when thousands of activists of the Hamas terrorist group slaughtered over 1,200 people in Israel near the Gaza Strip, wounded many hundreds, burned and destroyed homes and abducted 253 Israelis and foreign nationals into Gaza. These events led to a lengthy war between Israel and Gaza. The war spread to other fronts, Lebanon and the West Bank, with growing Iranian involvement. The war went on for several years in varying intensity. Some months were quiet, others saw intensive fighting.

These crises brought about many changes: Israel failed to set attainable goals for ending the war, focusing on retaliating against aggression. It had to call in significant reserve forces, causing ongoing damage to its economy; it refused to accept a diplomatic settlement proposed by the United States, the European Union and moderate Arab states, and fell out of favor with them, too. With no clear diplomatic horizon, American support for Israel waned; Israel's military weakness encouraged aggression.

The 2026 parliamentary elections were cancelled due to the state of emergency. The judiciary was faltering for lack of judicial appointments and for fear of the government. This loss of democratic infrastructure, the economic crisis and growing uncertainty about the future intensified emi-

gration by strong sectors of the economy. First to leave were high-tech employees, followed by doctors, academics and even military professionals, particularly from the air force and Military Intelligence. This emigration still continues, over two decades later. The emigrants relocated partly to the United States, partly to other English-speaking countries, and the remainder to southern European countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal.

Meanwhile, the regime gradually changed. The Knesset and the government were dissolved and replaced by a religious parliament, the Sanhedrin, elected by the last government and leading rabbis. The Sanhedrin elects the president, who heads the government with no term limits. The jurisdiction of the courts was severely curtailed, while that of rabbinical courts was expanded. The police was reinforced with a national guard, and both organizations took a harsh stand with respect to dissidents. Severe censorship was imposed and liberal media outlets such as Haaretz and Channel 13 News were shut down.

Foreign investment in Israel quickly declined to nearly zero by 2033. GDP per capita slumped and GDP growth slowed down significantly. Despite the wave of emigration, Israel's population continued to grow due to high birth rates among the remaining populace. Israel dropped to 65th place in world GDP per capita rankings, on par with countries such as Argentina and Malaysia.

Selected quotes from a 2048 Wikipedia entry. Updated April, 2048.

Long droughts and severe heat waves hit the region hard due to global warming, accelerating emigration and socio-economic decline.

With Israel ceasing to be a democracy and in light of its political and military conduct, the United States terminated its longtime support, going as far as imposing sanctions on it. In its place, Israel turned to China and Russia for support, and is now in their sphere of influence. Israel's threat to use nuclear weapons is the main reason it has not been conquered or vanquished.

The decline in living standards, the regime changes and the growing isolation from the West also led to a rise in crime and increased conflicts between various parts of society. The ultra-Orthodox remain economically disadvantaged, and only a few of them serve in the military, yet their political leaders form the backbone of the state's ruling body, similar to the regimes in several neighboring Muslim states.

Occasionally, a politician promising to solve Israel's woes comes into power. However, like Benjamin Netanyahu, whose government was the root cause of the 2023 crises, they only end up making things worse. The civil leadership is typically made up of religious functionaries, while the military leadership is primarily religious-nationalist. With time, Israel became more and more similar to Iran, which underwent similar political and economic processes, though these originated in a revolution rather than through gradual change. World Jewry, with the exception of the ultra-Orthodox community, distanced itself from Israel. Israel is deemed an extreme, failed state, undemocratic and illiberal, espousing a radical branch of Judaism and promoting theocratic and authoritarian values.

The author is a professor of economics at Tel Aviv University.