

DAILY COMMENT

# WHAT JOE BIDEN MUST TELL THE ISRAELI PUBLIC

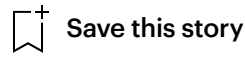
*Amid the escalating horror in Gaza, the President will have to go around Benjamin Netanyahu to forge a postwar vision for the region.*

**By Bernard Avishai**

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Photograph by Leigh Vogel / Bloomberg / Getty



On February 22nd, four months into Israel's ground invasion of Gaza, Benjamin Netanyahu presented his war cabinet with a short document sketching out what, in his view, "absolute victory" looks like. The timing was not surprising. The Israel Defense Forces are poised to attack the southern Gazan city of Rafah, where Israel believes that four of Hamas's last six battalions are hiding in tunnels and holding what is estimated to be around a hundred still surviving hostages. Netanyahu told CBS on Sunday that, once the assault begins, "the intense phase of the fighting" will be "weeks away from completion." As for his postwar plan for Gaza, Netanyahu offered a laconic mixture of counter-insurgency and Greater Israel fantasies, to which the hostages' lives seem subordinated. No surprises there, either.

President Joe Biden purports to have other ideas. He told a reporter in New York this week—while eating ice cream with the late-night host Seth Meyers—that he hopes for a ceasefire deal "by next Monday." For the past few months, his State Department has projected a postwar vision that includes Saudi Arabia's normalization of relations with Israel, in return for a process leading to a demilitarized Palestinian state. But the Biden Administration, having underwritten Netanyahu's tactics, risks being subordinated, too. An attack on Rafah would compound the carnage to which Biden is already considered an accomplice, and it would imperil the effort to lead Arab countries to a kind of military and economic alliance in which the integration of Israel might be feasible.

There is an opportunity cost for Israeli politics, too. Netanyahu's real opposition, now, is Biden. There are secular leaders in Israel positioned to support an alternative vision for Gaza and the region, and, arguably, to bring Netanyahu down. But dread grips the public, and these leaders currently have no real standing

in the absence of a U.S. President detailing a plan, proving the support of Arab allies, and warning Israel of the dire consequences of defying him. Biden might well reunite the Democratic Party, and get himself reelected, in the process. (In the Michigan Democratic primary on Tuesday, the “uncommitted” vote, protesting Biden’s handling of the war in Gaza, was just shy of the spread between Biden and Trump in 2020.)

Amid the I.D.F.’s proclaimed effort to root out Hamas, an estimated thirty thousand people in Gaza have been killed. The I.D.F. claims that around ten thousand were Hamas fighters (the Gaza Health Ministry does not specify that category)—seventy per cent of the dead are reportedly women and minors. Tens of thousands more, including many children, have suffered serious injuries and amputations. Rafah is a nearly twenty-five-square-mile area, in which refugees from Gaza City and Khan Younis are now sheltering. There are currently around 1.5 million civilians there, most of whom are living in tents—an almost sixfold increase in the population since the war began. (In all of Gaza, at least half the buildings have been destroyed or damaged.) United Nations agencies warn of famine, and note that there is no drinking water or water for showers in many shelters, and that there are many reported cases of hepatitis A, gastroenteritis, diarrhea, smallpox, lice, and influenza. Medical facilities have been raided. The refugees are utterly dependent on the humanitarian aid that is brought in, on average, by about eighty-five trucks.

On Sunday, Biden’s national-security adviser, Jake Sullivan, told NBC that the invasion of Rafah should not proceed “unless there is a clear and executable plan to protect those civilians.” Netanyahu’s war cabinet contends that this population can just be moved out of harm’s way. Reserve Major General Tamir Hayman, the managing director of Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies, told me that the I.D.F. is developing a plan to move refugees “north,” along the coast, and in a central area south of Gaza City. (“We are speaking of people who have anyway left their places and are living in tents; the difference between a tent in the south or a

tent in the center isn't so great; and the choice is easier [than the original move], and is moreover in the general direction of home," Hayman said.) But any such plan seems a portent of greater catastrophe.

On Thursday, it was reported that at least a hundred and twelve people were killed, and hundreds more injured, when an aid convoy carrying flour and canned food that was escorted by Israeli troops was thronged by starving civilians in the Nabulsi roundabout, quite near the area Hayman spoke of. First eyewitness accounts suggest that Israeli troops fired on the crowd, and although it is not yet clear how many died from gunfire and how many from being trampled or run over—in the local hospital, most of the injuries were said to be bullet wounds—more such horrors seem inevitable if refugees are forced north. (A spokesman for the I.D.F. initially denied that it was responsible for the deaths, and later said that it is “continuing to investigate” the incident.) Biden announced that the U.S. will be initiating airdrops of food and supplies. In Rafah itself, civilians will be in even greater danger.

The use of air power is how the I.D.F. minimizes dangers to its land forces—of which, as of this writing, two hundred and forty-two soldiers have died. The I.D.F. revealed that, in an audacious raid on February 11th, it rescued two hostages from a Rafah neighborhood. The Gaza Health Ministry reported that at least ninety-four people, including young children, were killed in the aerial bombardment that provided the troops cover.

Nor does Netanyahu's postwar plan convincingly suggest how the crisis might end. Israel, his document reads, would maintain security control over the Strip, and demilitarize it, insuring that a “southern closure” will prevent “smuggling from Egypt—both underground and above ground, including at the Rafah crossing.” Gazan youth would be “deradicalized.” Civil affairs would be run by “local officials” who have no ties to “countries or entities that support terrorism”—an apparent reference to Egypt and the Gulf states, which would notionally be called upon to invest in Gaza's rebuilding, a vast project that will cost billions. “The

rehabilitation plan will be financed and led by countries acceptable to Israel,” Netanyahu disingenuously claims. No such candidates are mentioned. Neither is the Palestinian Authority.

Clearly, Netanyahu and his coalition allies—including the finance minister, Bezalet Smotrich, and the internal-security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir—are imagining an expansion of the occupation. Various coalition ministers participated in a mass rally in Jerusalem on January 28th, demanding, amid dancing and singing, continuing the fight. Ben-Gvir taunted Gazans, exhorting “voluntary emigration,” and envisioning Jewish settlers returning to the Strip. A Hebrew University poll suggests that a solid majority of Israelis opposes such resettlement. Netanyahu himself is on record saying that it’s “not a realistic goal,” but he does not say why it *is* realistic to attack in Rafah and yet expect to bring the hostages home alive, or, for that matter, expect local Palestinian officials to put themselves forward for the administration of Gaza under indefinite Israeli rule.

Biden’s team, not quite as clearly, is seeking a different endgame. It vetoed, on February 20th, a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for a permanent truce, yet Biden had said on February 12th (with Jordan’s King Abdullah II by his side) that a multi-week pause in the fighting might be used “to build something more enduring.” What he seemed to be alluding to was a plan, sketched in some detail by Secretary of State Antony Blinken to the *Times’s* Tom Friedman, at Davos, in January, that would essentially entail the I.D.F. gradually turning over administration of Gazan cities to a “reformed” P.A., reinforced, in effect, by Egyptian troops and by Saudi and Emirati money. The Sunni states would get a defense pact with the U.S. against Iran and a commitment from Israel to accept a “pathway” toward an eventual, demilitarized Palestinian state. It is hard to see how we get a hostage deal and ceasefire by Monday: Hamas wants a permanent ceasefire, its own version of victory, and has called Biden’s claim “premature”; Smotrich, determined to see the I.D.F. in Rafah, insists that bringing home the hostages “is not the most important thing.” But, meanwhile, Biden is

discretely promoting his larger plan, in the obvious hope that a deal for the hostages can be folded into it. To reform the P.A., Washington has been pressuring President Mahmoud Abbas, now eighty-eight, to take on a purely ceremonial role and transfer genuine power to a new government of technocrats; on Monday, Abbas accepted his cabinet's resignation and hinted that he would appoint as Prime Minister the head of the Palestine Investment Fund, Mohammad Mustafa, a former World Bank official. Mustafa told me, back in 2014, of his desire to see Hamas leaders subordinated to P.A. officials and to "extend the umbrella of nonviolence to Gaza." At Davos this year, he acknowledged that Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia might well be critical to the rebuilding of Gaza. The Israeli news station Channel 12 has reported that Egyptian officials explicitly agreed to provide "policing forces" should a "reformed" P.A. request it. Nasser al-Qudwa, Yasir Arafat's nephew, who is a close associate of the imprisoned Fatah icon Marwan Barghouti—and is often mentioned as a possible replacement for Abbas—told me that he believes strongly in "a temporary, multinational Arab security presence" in Gaza, as it rebuilds, where "Egyptians will be the backbone."

Netanyahu, meanwhile, says that the Palestinian situation must be solved in direct negotiations "without preconditions." Of course, *he* has preconditions, which are that the whole Land of Israel—read, the entire West Bank—is Israel's, and that a Palestinian state, which, notionally had always also included Gaza, is impossible. Netanyahu does still face domestic opposition. Polls show that, if an election were held now, his theocratic coalition would lose badly—by as many as thirty seats in the hundred-and-twenty-seat Knesset—to a coalition of secular centrists led by the former chiefs of staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, who joined the war cabinet in October. They also show that more than seventy per cent of Israelis want early elections, which would otherwise be held in a couple of years.

The disaffection reflects Netanyahu's ill preparedness on October 7th but also his assault on the judiciary, which prompted several months of divisive

demonstrations. A government crisis is already brewing over the exemption of ultra-Orthodox youth from national service, which the Supreme Court has deemed illegal; the issue pits theocrats against secularist generals, including the Likud defense minister, Yoav Gallant. Hostages' families, growing desperate, have mustered thousands of sympathizers to weekly demonstrations; they've broken into Knesset meetings and blocked highways. Six weeks ago, in a widely watched television interview, Eisenkot—who had lost a son and a nephew in the war—insisted that “the hostages will only return alive if there is a deal,” and whoever speaks of the “absolute defeat” of Hamas was “not speaking the truth.” He insisted that the government must “chart a path”—seemingly code for aligning with Biden's evolving plan.

Secular leaders such as Eisenkot are, however, confined by the grim public mood, and they still trust, reflexively, in Israeli powers of military intimidation. (Hayman, who is close to Eisenkot, and would otherwise support Biden's plan, believes that “dismantling” Hamas's organized forces would not contradict that strategy but, rather, “complement it”—by pushing Hamas “below the threshold,” where it could not threaten to dominate the P.A.) Tens of thousands of Israelis have been displaced from villages along the Lebanese border, which are being shelled by Hezbollah. Residents of villages and kibbutzim along the border with Gaza have not moved back. The most profound dread is a wholesale confrontation with Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies, without American backing. Meanwhile, if fighting continues through Ramadan—when, in recent years, Israeli police have restricted access to Al-Aqsa Mosque, in East Jerusalem, allegedly to curb rioting—wider violence in the city seems likely. Hamas has called for a mass march to Al-Aqsa on the first day of Ramadan.

“Every night, television newscasts retell the story of a victim of the original attack, or a soldier's funeral, or a released hostage still suffering the trauma,” Eliezer Yaari, a veteran broadcaster and filmmaker, former combat pilot, and lifelong peace activist, told me. The economy has shrunk, while the I.D.F. has proposed



increasing the mandatory reservist service to forty-two days a year, and raised the age of exemption to forty-five. “We see almost nothing of the suffering on the other side,” he said. “But, if we did, we could not take it all in. We’re growing increasingly numb to our own suffering, so how can we not be numb to the suffering of Gazans?”

In this context, Biden must lead: he cannot just telephone his friend Bibi, give counsel, and then, as has been reported, call him “an asshole” behind his back. The Israeli public must be presented with a stark choice: a detailed regional plan with credible American guarantees or Netanyahu’s defiant isolation; Gantz and Eisenkot would thus gain cover for diplomatic realism beyond simple military deterrence. The State Department has already signalled a new toughness, putting four violent West Bank settlers under a sanctions regime. More can be added to that list. Gantz is reportedly travelling to Washington tomorrow, to hold talks with Administration officials, without having coordinated the trip with Netanyahu—and infuriating him. Biden might, as Richard Haass, the former head of the Council on Foreign Relations, suggested, give a speech in Israel, “over the prime minister’s head,” that would “clearly show what the U.S. believes,” much the way Netanyahu, in 2015, aimed to bypass President Barack Obama and sway American opinion against the Iran deal by addressing the Republican-led Congress. The former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told me, “If Biden openly pressures Israel to accept his deal, he will gain some of the support that he might be losing in his own country.”

“The Biden Administration believes,” Chuck Freilich, a former Israeli deputy national-security adviser and the author of “Israeli National Security,” told me, “that Bibi has no coherent way of coping with the long term, or fully achieving his government’s military goals. It believes that the fighting must be scaled back in favor of a diplomatic track, whose centerpiece is movement toward a Palestinian state, which is the key to reshaping a new regional order, but a very unpopular idea in Israel right now.” Still, Freilich said, “If Netanyahu pits himself against the U.S.,



rejects normalization with the Saudis, risks escalation in the north, sacrifices the hostages—after the war’s outbreak, the state of the economy, the judicial overhaul, the endless empty posturing—the streets will explode.” ♦

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