

## Netanyahu: Israel pursuing brief Gaza cease-fire for several hostages

Noa Shpigel, Jack Khoury and Jonathan Lis

Israel is trying to reach a deal in which a few hostages would be returned in exchange for a brief cease-fire in Gaza, in line with a proposal unveiled by Egypt on Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Likud Knesset members on Monday.

"Now that Sinwar is gone, this may have more of a chance," he said, referring to Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' former leader, who Israel killed earlier this month.

But Hamas sources told the Saudi television station Asharq News that they are willing to accept the Egyptian proposal only if it is used to jump-start a deal that would see Israel withdraw completely from Gaza.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi said Sunday that his country had proposed the release of four living hostages in exchange for a two-day cease-fire and the release of several Palestinian prisoners. Speaking at a press conference in Cairo, he added that the cease-fire would mark the start of 10 days of intensive negotiations on a permanent cease-fire.

At Monday's meeting with Likud MKs, Netanyahu said that if it were up to him, he would accept the Egyptian proposal immediately, but Hamas is once again refusing.

Hamas said it is willing to discuss any proposal that would include an end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. However,



Protesters calling for a deal to free the hostages outside the Knesset in Jerusalem on Monday; 17 people were arrested. See story, Page 2.

Naama Grynbaum

it added, it would accept the Egyptian proposal only if it is accompanied by guarantees that the 10 days of negotiations would include an option of extending the cease-fire until an agreement is reached.

Asharq's report also said that Hamas officials were

pessimistic about the chances of reaching a full cease-fire in Gaza before the U.S. presidential election on November 5.

The Egyptians presented their proposal to Shin Bet director Ronen Bar when he was in Cairo last week. They said its goal was to

jump-start a larger deal by providing an opportunity to examine both sides' commitment to the process and their ability to deliver the goods.

On Sunday, Mossad director David Barnea discussed the deal with Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed

Al Thani and CIA director William Burns at a meeting in Doha. But after Barnea returned to Israel Monday morning, sources involved in the talks said the gaps between Israel and Hamas are still wide, and it's too early to predict whether they will agree to soften their posi-

tions in a way that would make a deal possible.

America, Qatar and Egypt now want to get the Israeli and Hamas negotiators to the same city within a few days, possibly even later this week, to resume indirect negotiations between them in an effort to reach a deal.

## Despite threats, UTJ won't insist on draft exemption law now

Aaron Rabinowitz, Michael Hauser Tov, Noa Shpigel and Chen Maanit

Leading rabbis in the two factions of the United Torah Judaism party believe that this is not the time to insist on legislation exempting all yeshiva students from compulsory army service, sources in the ultra-Orthodox parties said on Monday.

In an ultimatum, Housing Minister Yitzhak Goldknopf, who is chairman of the UTJ party, said he would oppose approval of the 2025 state budget unless the draft exemption law is passed. But other prominent Haredi political leaders, including Shas party chairman Arye Dery and Knesset Finance Committee chairman Moshe Gafni (UTJ), have not made similar threats.

Those close to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu increasingly believe that the ultra-Orthodox party leaders have no intention of bringing down the government over its failure to advance a draft exemption law despite threats to do so.

Sources in the Haredi parties told Haaretz that party leaders realize that it is impractical to approve the draft exemption law at this time. "Even the current bill to which they have applied [legislative] succession law is not acceptable to us nor does it meet even the minimum requirements of quite a few coalition Knesset members," said one source. "It's clear to everyone that there really is no law that can meet our requirements and those of the attorney general and the High Court, certainly

in current conditions." UTJ sources claimed that behind the scenes Goldknopf is coordinating with other party leaders. But one UTJ source told Haaretz that no such coordination exists. "If he resigns that doesn't mean the rest have to follow him," he said.

Haredi leaders are not indifferent to the number of war casualties and the pain of the bereaved families of soldiers, as well as the change in public opinion, he said. That has caused them to ease their stance.

"They still want to exempt all yeshiva students, but today when they talk

## Gagging the prosecutors

Editorial, Page 5

about it, with the exception of Goldknopf, they feel uncomfortable, they move nervously in their chairs. They see the funerals, the orphans and the widows, and they feel uncomfortable," the source said.

Senior coalition officials said the draft exemption law will not be advanced anytime soon, and part of the reason for that is the understanding that it would be impossible to find wording acceptable both to the Haredim and to other elements in the coalition, above all Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, Yuli Edelstein, the chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and Gideon Sa'ar, minister without portfolio.

See DRAFT, Page 3

## Netanyahu smells total victory – over Israel

Analysis Yossi Verter

The last sentence of the opposition leader's speech to the opening of the Knesset's winter session perfectly described the scene in the house. "You no longer have any shame," Yair Lapid told cabinet ministers. That was an understatement, almost

British-style.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ministers were savoring the very fact that they're still in power a year after the disaster of October 7, 2023. And the opposition seemed defeated before the session even began.

Netanyahu and Co. celebrated their total victory on Monday. It was a victory over the norms demanding that they take responsibility for the massacre, over moral values, over statesmanlike behavior, over the decisive majority of Israelis who have lost faith in them and over the hostages' worn-out families, who have gotten a cold shoulder from most

members of the governing coalition.

It's not that we expected Netanyahu to admit responsibility or ask forgiveness; if he didn't do so at either of the memorial ceremonies he engineered on Sunday, why should he do so in the Knesset? But his speech was unusually arrogant and out of touch even for him.

The man who deliberately

maintained Hamas in the Gaza Strip for 15 years and then, in the year before the massacre, also deliberately weakened his country's social fabric, dismissed the security services' warnings and dealt a mortal blow to the army's deterrence is now billing himself as the protector of "humanity." No longer just the country, or the Western world, or West-

ern civilization, but all of humanity. Next time, he'll add outer space. He's a Jewish Hercules.

His self-satisfaction was completely justified. Shortly before the session began, he successfully navigated around a major pothole that threatened his government's stability. The

See VICTORY, Page 4



Coalition members in the Knesset on Monday. Olivier Fitoussi

## Knesset approves bills banning UNRWA from operating in Israel

Noa Shpigel, Jack Khoury, Etan Nechin, Ben Samuels and Reuters

The Knesset approved on Monday two bills that ban UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, from operating in Israel. The bills were advanced despite there being no alternative body to take on the agency's operations in Gaza or East Jerusalem, and in the face of mounting international criticism against the legislation.

The bills are aimed at making it substantially more difficult for UNRWA to operate in Israel, including in East Jerusalem, as well as in the West Bank and Gaza, and to inflict financial damage on the agency that provides educational, social welfare, food and other services to millions of Palestinians.

The media adviser to UNRWA, Adnan Abu Hasna, said Israel's decision to ban the organization's operation inside the country will mean the collapse of the humanitarian process as a whole. Hasna described the decision as an "unprecedented" escalation while speaking to Qatar's Al Jazeera Mubasher TV.

Following the approval of the bills, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement in English on X, saying that UNRWA work-

ers were "involved in terrorist activities" against Israel and "must be held accountable." State Department Spokesperson Matt Miller said after the approval of the bills: "We've made quite clear to the government of Israel we are deeply concerned by this proposed legislation." He added, "Passage of the legislation could have implications under U.S. law and U.S. policy."

Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations, Danny Danon, published a video statement on X following the passage of the bills, saying that Israel would "continue to cooperate with humanitarian organizations, but not with those who cooperate with Hamas terrorists."

The first of the two bills to be approved states that "UNRWA will not operate any missions, won't provide any service and won't hold any activity – directly or indirectly – in the sovereign territory of Israel."

The second bill, approved shortly after, is aimed at revoking exemptions given to UNRWA, including tax exemptions and diplomatic status and immunity. Under it, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) will be required to cease its working relations with UNRWA.

This proposal combines three separate bills submitted by lawmakers Ron Katz, Dan Illouz, Yulia Malinovsky, and other Knesset members.

other lawmakers after being merged with a bill submitted by New Hope-United Right lawmaker, Sharren Haskel. The law passed by a vote of 92-10. Lawmakers from several opposition parties, including Yesh Atid, the National Unity Party and Yisrael Beiteinu, voted with the coalition. Labor MKs weren't present for the vote.

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Mohamed Azakir/Reuters

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## Sahar promised her father she wouldn't let him die in the tunnels

Nir Hasson

Nissan Kalderon struggles to let go of the moment he was reunited with his niece, Sahar, after her release from Hamas captivity almost a year ago.

Sahar is the daughter of Ofer Kalderon, 54, Nissan's brother, who was abducted on October 7, 2023, from his home in Nir Oz together with 17-year-old Sahar and her brother, 13-year-old Erez. Sahar and Erez were released in the November 2023 deal, but left behind their father, Ofer, in the Hamas tunnels in Gaza.

"She whispered in my ear, 'Dad asked me to fight for him, and said he didn't want to die there.' What will I tell her now if her father doesn't come home alive? She promised him that she'd fight for him. What can you say to such a girl? What is such a girl supposed to do?" asks Nissan in despair.

"How can I explain to my brother that we're talking about the 400th day rally, how should I explain that to him, where was I and what did I do?"

Nissan, from Kibbutz Sufa in the western Negev, left his home on the morning of October 7, 2023. He was due to work in Kibbutz



Nissan Kalderon with a poster of his brother, Ofer Kalderon.

Eliyahu Hershkovitz

Nir Oz's fields near the Gaza border. During the year before the war, farmers had to coordinate the work with the Gaza Division, but Kalderon decided to work elsewhere.

"I said, let's not bother the army on the holiday. We'll work in more distant fields." Before 6:30 A.M., he was in his car getting ready to leave.

I put my coffee in the dashboard cupholder when I saw the Iron Dome missiles

in the mirror." He called his brother, and they agreed to immediately leave the border zone and meet with their families in Mitzpe Ramon, as they did in every round of fighting. But before he could prepare the family caravan to leave, he was forced to take shelter with his family in the apartment's sheltered space from terrorists who had entered the kibbutz.

At the same time, Ofer and his children, Sahar

and Erez, were fleeing their home, which had been torched by terrorists. When they tried to hide in the bushes, Ofer was captured, and his children saw the terrorists beat him.

Sahar was able to hide in the bushes for two more hours until she was captured, and Erez was caught trying to climb onto a roof of one of the houses. Sahar

See SAHAR, Page 2