

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 / March 2, 2024

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.

[...]

"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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