

**Please Note: Due to family circumstances and time constraints the news will be less detailed with fewer highlighted areas and comments and more referrals to the Article resource sites for your further perusal. RDB**

## Hamas seen working to maintain control of Gaza via Trump-backed bodies

*Documents show terror group moving armed-wing chiefs into civil roles that will let it hold power via technocratic administration, while also girding for fresh round against Israel*

By [Lazar Berman](#) and [Nava Freiberg](#)

23 February 2026, 10:19 pm Updated at 12:36 am



*Hamas gunmen, wearing captured IDF uniforms and brandishing Israeli weapons, stand in formation in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, February 15, 2025. (AP Photo/ Abdel Kareem Hana)*

**US President Donald Trump is pushing full steam ahead with his vision for a post-war Gaza that is not ruled by Hamas. But evidence seen by The Times of Israel shows how Hamas is moving effectively to subvert him.**

**The terror group is preparing a shadow government, and working to insert military commanders into civil roles once the Palestinian Authority-linked technocratic leadership begins its**

**activities in Gaza, documents seen by The Times of Israel indicate.**

**At the Board of Peace meeting in Washington last week, Trump won commitments for around \$7 billion toward the rebuilding of Gaza, and has five countries pledging to send troops to the nascent International Stabilization Force, meant to replace Israeli troops in the enclave.**

There are also some signs of progress closer to the war-torn territory. The technocratic National Committee for the Administration of Gaza, or NCAG, meant to manage day-to-day civilian affairs in Gaza, is now operating, though only from Cairo, with no date yet set for entering the Gaza Strip. NCAG is also recruiting candidates for a transitional police force meant to serve as Gaza's civil law enforcement agency.

"When you think of Israel, we've done the biggest thing of all," said Trump in his address to the Board of Peace. "We have peace in the Middle East right now."

But despite the international efforts and optimistic statements at the Board of Peace and elsewhere, what are understood to be internal Hamas documents seen by The Times of Israel show that Hamas has no intention of giving up control over Gaza in practice, even if it does so in name.



*President Donald Trump holds the charter during a signing ceremony on his Board of Peace initiative at the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, January 22, 2026. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber, File)*

### **A new role for Hamas commanders**

Some four months into the Gaza ceasefire, Israel still holds over half of the Strip, but nearly all 2 million residents of the enclave are in areas that continue to be held by Hamas.

Under the deal that ended the war, Hamas is supposed to hand day-to-day governance of Gaza to the NCAG. The 15-member technocrat committee is headed by former Palestinian Authority deputy minister Ali

Shaath, who will operate under the auspices of diplomat Nikolay Mladenov, the Board of Peace's High Representative overseeing the Gaza transition.

While refusing to give up its arms, Hamas has gone out of its way to give the impression that it is cooperating just enough with regard to giving up civil control of Gaza to keep the key mediating states happy.

"Protocols are prepared, files are complete, and committees are in place to oversee the handover, ensuring a complete transfer of governance in the Gaza Strip across all sectors to the technocratic committee," Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem told AFP last week.



**Ali Shaath, head of the Palestinian technocratic committee for managing the Gaza Strip, seen in Cairo, Egypt, on January 19, 2026. (AFP)**

Hamas is indeed preparing to hand over its records and files on its ministries, The Times of Israel has learned.

But according to the documents seen by The Times of Israel, Izz al-Din al-Haddad, who replaced Muhammad Sinwar after he was killed last May in an Israeli strike, has issued orders for Hamas members to make copies of any files handed over to the new government.

This allows the group to maintain a record of government employees who can potentially be threatened or pressured if needed.

The Israel Defense Forces have warned the government that Hamas is adapting to the emerging situation in Gaza by making sure its members are in key roles.



**Hamas Gaza chief Izz al-Din Haddad, then the commander of Hamas's Gaza City Brigade, is seen in a video released by Hamas's military wing in May 2022.**

“Hamas is advancing steps on the ground meant to preserve its influence and grip in the Gaza Strip ‘from the bottom up’ by means of integrating its supporters in government offices, security apparatuses, and local authorities,” the military said in a [document](#) presented to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in late January.

The documents seen by The Times of Israel also show that the group in recent weeks has focused on moving members of its military wing into civilian roles that are set to become part of

the NCAG governing apparatus.

Written orders, apparently from Haddad, include specific instructions about moving commanders from Hamas's armed Al-Qassam Brigades into civilian roles so that they will be ready to work with the new technocratic government.



**Members of the Al-Ghafaer family break their fast during the holy month of Ramadan next to the tent where they are sheltering at the Gaza City port, on February 20, 2026. (AP Photo/Abdel Kareem Hana)**

Two Palestinian sources with direct knowledge of Hamas's operations [told](#) Reuters last week that the group had named five district governors, all of them with links to the Al-Qassam Brigades. They also replaced senior officials in Gaza's economy and interior ministries, which manage taxation and security, the sources said.

A new deputy health minister was shown touring Gaza hospitals in a ministry video released this month.

“Shaath may have the key to the car, and he may even be

allowed to drive, but it is a Hamas car,” one of the sources told Reuters.



**The Rumah Sakit Indonesia Hospital in Gaza City on November 1, 2023, amid the ongoing battles between Israel and the Palestinian terror group Hamas. (Bashar TALEB / AFP/ File)**

Hamas's internal intelligence apparatus appears to be intact as well. The Times of Israel viewed a written order from a Hamas brigade commander ordering his forces to increase surveillance at several sites, including at hospitals, and to report any suspicions to local commanders.

### **The coming clash**

There is evidence that Hamas believes another high-intensity military clash with Israel is only a matter of time, The Times of

Israel has learned.

That prognosis represents a rare area of agreement between Israel and Hamas.



**IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir meets with troops in southern Gaza's Rafah, February 13, 2026. (Israel Defense Forces)**

Last month, a senior Israeli security official [said](#) that it was looking increasingly likely that the Israel Defense Forces would have to act militarily against Hamas to disarm it, since Hamas would not agree to give up its weapons willingly under the ceasefire agreement.

Senior Hamas officials have said as much publicly.

“Criminalizing the resistance, its weapons, and those who carried it out is something we should not accept,” [said](#) Khaled Mashaal at a conference in Doha earlier this month.

“As long as there is occupation, there is resistance. Resistance

is a right of peoples under occupation... something nations take pride in,” said Mashaal.

Hamas is willing to place its “heavy” weapons — rockets and explosives — in warehouses guarded by the IDF and Egyptians, an Israeli source said.



**Rockets are found by IDF troops in southern Gaza's Rafah, in a handout photo issued on January 1, 2025. (Israel Defense Forces)**

It is also willing to hand over maps of its tunnels, but sources said that Hamas would likely not report on all of its tunnels. The IDF believes that at least 60 percent of Hamas's tunnels in Gaza are still intact, though the percentage could be higher, as the army does not know how many it has not yet found.

Advertisement

An Israeli security official told The Times of Israel that Hamas was determined to keep both its AK-47 semi-automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, but stressed that Israel would not allow such a scenario under any

circumstances.

The only weapons Israel will allow Palestinian forces to keep, said the official, are handguns, but only in the hands of a new Gazan police force and not Hamas.



**Armed Hamas police officers patrol in Gaza City, October 11, 2025. (Ali Hassan/Flash90)**

Hamas is widely understood to fear that large anti-Hamas clans in Gaza will seek to take revenge after years of brutal repression should they hand over their rifles.

But it also wants to make sure it is ready to fight the IDF again, as it is convinced that Israel is going to reinvade Hamas-held areas, according to a message the group's Gaza leadership has sent to its politburo in Qatar, The Times of Israel has learned.

To prepare for that fight, Haddad is believed to have reorganized Hamas's top military council last week. He

appointed new intelligence chiefs, regional commanders, and heads of weapons manufacturing and propaganda, The Times of Israel has learned.

Israel has been making the case to Trump that in order for his vision of Middle East peace to be unlocked — and perhaps for him to win a Nobel Peace Prize — Hamas must be disarmed, a source with knowledge of Israel's thinking told The Times of Israel.

The only way that will happen, Israel has told the White House, according to the source, is for the IDF to go back into Gaza. Israel made the case that an operation would be much quicker and more aggressive than previous operations, as there are no more hostages in the Strip, and Israel can operate everywhere and at full strength.

Jacob Magid and Emanuel Fabian contributed to this report. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-seen-working-to-maintain-control-of-gaza-via-trump-backed-bodies/>

**Board of Peace said looking into ‘stablecoin’ to boost economy of postwar Gaza**

## Israeli tech entrepreneur spearheading project to set up a US dollar-pegged cryptocurrency for use in the enclave, where shekels have become scarce, FT reports

By [Tol Staff](#) Today, 1:16 am



*Palestinians shop at a market in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, January 30, 2026. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash9)*

**Officials with the Board of Peace, the US-led body meant to oversee postwar Gaza's reconstruction, are reportedly exploring creating a cryptocurrency to jumpstart the Strip's economic recovery.**

**The currency would be a so-called "stablecoin," whose value stays relatively stable because it is tied to a reliable asset or commodity such as the US dollar, the Financial Times reported on Monday, citing several sources familiar with the idea.**

**The cryptocurrency project is being led, according to the report, by Israeli tech entrepreneur Liran Tancman. Tancman is a veteran of Israel's intelligence corps who is serving as an unpaid adviser to the Board of Peace and has been working with senior US officials on Gaza-related projects over the past year.**

Also involved are members of the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza, the Palestinian technocratic body that operates under the Board of Peace, and the office of Nickolay Mladenov, the former UN official who is the board's high representative for the territory.

Talks about setting up such a coin, which would be pegged to the US dollar, are in their very early stages, and many details are yet to be determined, the report said.



"This will not be a 'Gaza Coin' or a new Palestinian currency, but a means to allow Gazans to transact digitally," a person familiar with the project told the FT.

*Liran Tancman (Photo credit: Courtesy)*

Gazans use Israeli shekels, which have become scarce as the territory's economy has collapsed. Israel stopped allowing cash to enter the Strip early in the war that began with the Hamas-led October 7, 2023 attack, in an effort to curtail Hamas's ability to purchase weapons and pay its fighters.

Additionally, many wealthy families in Gaza withdrew their money from banks and then fled the territory when the war broke out. Rising

fears about Gaza's financial system prompted foreign businesses selling goods in the territory to demand cash payments.



*Palestinians shop at a market in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, on November 21, 2025. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)*

The Strip's banks and financial institutions have since been battered, and those who have access to shekels often [charge huge fees](#) for the currency's use. The idea, according to the source, is to circumvent those challenges.

Another source told the FT that the project was launched in order to "dry Gaza from cash so Hamas can't generate any."

Those familiar with the project denied that it would seek to separate the Palestinians in Gaza from those in the West Bank, where Palestinians also transact in shekels.



*A Palestinian vegetable merchant shows worn-out Israeli currency, July 9, 2025, in Gaza City. (AP/Jehad Alshrafi)*

One issue with the implementation of the stablecoin plan could be the state of cellular networks in Strip, where Israel has only allowed slow 2G service.

Tancman [told the Board of Peace](#), at its inaugural meeting earlier this month, that the network will be “upgraded with free, high-speed access” by July.

The Board of Peace, and the various bodies under its purview, were created as part of US President Donald Trump’s plan for Gaza. The plan is in its second phase, though some of its key

parts have yet to be implemented, such as Hamas’s disarmament, which is meant to be paired with a gradual withdrawal of the IDF from the Strip.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/board-of-peace-said-looking-into-stablecoin-to-boost-economy-of-postwar-gaza/>

## **US refuelers, cargo planes spotted at Ben Gurion Airport as Iran tensions ramp up**

***New anti-regime protests break out at universities across Tehran and elsewhere, after campuses reopen; footage shows clashes between students and Basij militia forces***

By [Emanuel Fabian](#),

[Agencies and Tol Staff](#) 23 February 2026, 7:25 pm Updated at 9:18 pm



*American refueling planes are seen at Ben Gurion Airport, February 23, 2026. (Social media; used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)*

**American refueler and cargo planes were spotted at Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv on Monday, amid a massive US buildup of military forces ahead of a potential attack on Iran.**

**There was no comment from Israeli authorities regarding the American military deployment at Israel’s main civilian airport.**

**The Boeing KC-135 refuelers and C-17 Globemaster cargo planes had arrived at Ben Gurion over the course of the preceding day. It was**

**unclear whether they were in the country temporarily as part of a stopover.**

At least two refuelers had arrived from Al Udeid base in Qatar — the biggest US base in the Middle East — according to [analysts](#) monitoring open-source flight tracking information.

Around the same time, the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world’s largest aircraft carrier, was seen arriving at Crete’s Souda Bay, likely as part of a supply stop at the US Naval Support Activity base located there.

S President Donald Trump ordered the carrier strike group to the Middle East earlier this month to join another carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln, that is already deployed to the region.

The US is holding talks with Iran over its nuclear program, but has [threatened to attack](#) if they do not bear fruit. Trump also vowed to help anti-government protesters in Iran, before the regime killed them en masse last month.

*The USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier arrives at Souda Bay on the island of Crete, Greece, February 23, 2026. (Stelios Misinas/Reuters)*

According to the [Military Air Tracking Alliance](#), a team of about 30 open-source analysts that routinely analyzes military and government flight activity, more than 85



fuel tankers and over 170 cargo planes have headed into the region since mid-February.

It is the [largest buildup of American military forces](#) in the Middle East since the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, though that buildup dwarfed this one, and included a major ground force, which this one does not.

India's foreign ministry urged its citizens Monday to leave Iran, citing the "evolving situation."

The ministry estimates there are usually around 10,000 citizens in Iran, who it said "should exercise due caution, avoid areas of protests or demonstrations, stay in contact with the Indian embassy in Iran and monitor local media for any developments."

Earlier, the US evacuated dozens of staffers from its embassy in Beirut, "as a precautionary measure amid anticipated regional developments."

That move came at a time of growing speculation that the Hezbollah terror group, of which Iran is the principal sponsor, [will attack Israel](#) if the US strikes the Islamic Republic.

### **Renewed protests, clashes break out at Iranian universities**

Inside Iran, at least eight new anti-regime protests erupted at universities in recent days, some of which have seen clashes with the Basij militia or students aligned with it.

#### Advertisement

They were the first large-scale demonstrations since the mass killing of anti-government protesters in January, mostly over January 8-9. Some 7,000 deaths have been confirmed, but estimates of the total number of those killed reach into the tens of thousands.

The new protests started when universities reopened on Saturday, after all in-person classes had been suspended January 4, with the regime officially citing cold weather as the reason, amid the unrest.

The BBC on Monday confirmed demonstrations at eight universities in Tehran since Saturday, as well as others in Isfahan and Mashhad.

In footage from a women's university in the capital, students were seen burning the regime's flag. Other campuses saw chants of "woman, life, freedom" – the slogan of a protest movement in 2022 that the regime repressed – and "long live the shah," a reference to Reza Pahlavi, whose father was deposed in 1979.

Video from the Amirkabir University of Technology in the capital showed clashes between the protesters and members of the Basij paramilitary force. Another video, from the University of Tehran, showed Basij members trying to enter a building in which demonstrators were taking refuge.

A protester from Sharif University in Tehran told The Guardian that anti-government students and Basij-aligned students physically clashed Saturday and Sunday. Another student told the broadcaster that protests are expected to continue in the days to come.

Iran state media reported that a text message, of an unknown source, was sent out en masse on Monday, reading: "The US president is a man of action. Wait and see."

As the earlier protests picked up steam, Trump vowed to intervene if the regime started shooting demonstrators. In the weeks since the regime did, the president has threatened to attack the country, but — with the exception of having thousands of Starlink terminals smuggled into Iran amid a regime-imposed internet blackout — the US is not known to have directly aided the protesters on the ground so far.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-refuelers-cargo-planes-spotted-at-ben-gurion-airport-as-iran-tensions-ramp-up/>

## **Netanyahu: An attack on Israel would be 'most serious mistake' in Iranian history**

***If war with Iran comes, internal conflicts 'will be put into deep freeze,' Opposition Leader Yair Lapid tells Knesset during 40-signatures debate***

By [Sam Sokol](#) and [Lazar Berman](#)

23 February 2026, 7:05 pm



*Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses the Knesset plenum in Jerusalem on February 23, 2026. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)*

**If Iran attacks Israel, it will be "perhaps the most serious mistake in their history," warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday evening, threatening an overwhelming response to any aggression.**

**Speaking during a so-called 40-signatures debate in the Knesset, Netanyahu asserted that Israel has never**

**been stronger than it is now and that Jerusalem's "pact with the United States has never been closer."**

**A 40-signatures debate is a monthly opportunity for lawmakers to compel the prime minister to speak and answer his opponents after they garner the requisite number of signatories on a petition. Monday's debate was called to criticize Netanyahu's security policies.**

If Iran attacks Israel, it will be "perhaps the most serious mistake in their history," warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday evening, threatening an overwhelming response to any aggression.

Speaking during a so-called 40-signatures debate in the Knesset, Netanyahu asserted that Israel has never been stronger than it is now and that Jerusalem's "pact with the United States has never been closer."

A 40-signatures debate is a monthly opportunity for lawmakers to compel the prime minister to speak and answer his opponents after they garner the requisite number of signatories on a petition. Monday's debate was called to criticize Netanyahu's security policies.

The prime minister asserted in his speech that his personal ties with US President Donald Trump, as well as those between the Israel Defense Forces and the US military, have never been better, while also warning that "we are in very complex and challenging times."

"We are keeping an eye open and prepared for any scenario. I made it clear to the Ayatollah regime that if they make perhaps the most serious mistake in their history and attack Israel, we will respond with a force they cannot imagine," he said.

Netanyahu's comments came four days after Trump [warned](#) Iran that it must reach a deal over its nuclear program or "bad things" will happen, and appeared to set a 10-15 day deadline before the US might take action



*This handout photo released by Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps's official website Sepanews on February 17, 2026, shows a rocket being fired during a military exercise by members of the IRGC and navy in the Strait of Hormuz. (SEPAH NEWS / AFP)*

Amid a massive US military buildup in the Middle East that has fueled fears of a wider war, Trump said negotiations with Iran were going well but insisted Tehran has to reach a "meaningful" agreement.

Trump has repeatedly threatened military action against Iran, at first over a deadly crackdown on anti-regime protesters last month that killed thousands, then more recently over its nuclear program. But he has refrained from setting a hard

deadline for taking action.

The New York Times reported on Sunday that Trump is [considering launching a limited strike](#) on Iran in the immediate future to pressure Tehran to agree to his nuclear demands. If the Islamic Republic continues to hold out, that strike could be followed by a far larger campaign later this year targeting regime change, the report said. The saber-rattling has put the entire region on edge, sparking concerns that a clash between the US and Iran would rapidly spread. Iran has warned that even a limited US strike would draw a strong military response, with strikes on US military interests in the region and on Israel.

Netanyahu kept his Knesset speech uncharacteristically short, eschewing the attacks on his political rivals that are traditionally the hallmark of such debates, and choosing instead to focus almost entirely on Iran.



*A handout photograph released by the US Navy on February 8, 2026, shows observers, including US lead negotiators Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, as they watch flight operations on the flight deck of Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) in the Arabian Sea, on February 7, 2026. (Hannah Tross / US NAVY / AFP)*

Now was not the time for lengthy debate, he told lawmakers, instead issuing a call for unity ahead of next week's Purim holiday, which celebrates an ancient victory of the Jews of the Persian empire over those who sought to destroy them.

"On the eve of the festival of Purim," he said, "we will stand together and, with God's help, we will ensure the eternity of Israel."

Opening Monday evening's debate, Yisrael Beytenu chairman Avigdor Liberman lashed out at Netanyahu, declaring him "the main guilty party" responsible for October 7, "the largest and most terrible massacre in the history of the Jewish people after the Holocaust."

Liberman accused Netanyahu of trying to obscure his failures as prime minister, asking him, "Where is the 'total victory'? You promised us total victory, but you brought total disgrace."

Opposition Leader Yair Lapid was also highly critical of Netanyahu, declaring that his historical legacy will be defined "only" by October 7.

"I understand the attempt to write a different history. You know the truth. That's what scares you so much. History will only remember you for October 7," Lapid said, referring to Netanyahu's efforts to deflect blame for the devastating Hamas attack. "How you didn't see where the suitcases of money from Qatar were leading. How you didn't see where the wrong, destructive policy of strengthening Hamas was leading."



**Opposition Leader Yair Lapid addresses the Knesset plenum in Jerusalem, February 23, 2026. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)**

Lapid also took aim at the Prime Minister's Office's effort to remove the word "massacre" from a bill commemorating October 7, stating that "when babies are burned, when entire families are murdered in a mass murder, it's not an event, it's a massacre. There will be no stronger or more significant association, nothing else that will define your term as prime minister, other than the October 7 massacre."

However, after excoriating Netanyahu, Lapid also pledged that Israel will stand as one in the face of any escalation with Iran, telling the Knesset that "all differences of opinion will be put into deep freeze" until the conflict is over.

"As in the past, I will mobilize for Israeli public diplomacy and strengthening Israel's international status," he declared. "As in the previous attack, I will go wherever necessary, from CNN to the British parliament, and tell them: 'You know that I am the head of the opposition, you know that Netanyahu and I are rivals, but Iran must be attacked with full force, the rule of the ayatollahs must be overthrown.'"

Jacob Magid and agencies contributed to this report. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-an-attack-on-israel-would-be-most-serious-mistake-in-iranian-history/>

## Revolutionary Guard generals back military leader over Khamenei's son, Israeli AI analysis finds

**Israeli startup AskIt, founded by former intelligence officials, built AI-driven synthetic profiles of 122 real IRGC commanders to analyze their strategic mindset and simulate how they would respond to sensitive succession scenarios**

[ynet Global](#) | 19:23

**Israeli startup AskIt has created AI-based behavioral profiles of 122 commanders in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, each modeled on the individual's real background including personal and military history, age, family status, and psychological characteristics. The synthetic generals database draws on open-source data, but goes deeper into each commander's cognitive patterns using methodologies from psychology and socio-physics, making it possible to understand how these commanders think even in scenarios where they could never be surveyed directly.**

**One of the questions posed to the 'Iranian generals' was who they believe should succeed Khamenei after his death. Nearly 70% (85 commanders) believe a senior military figure should lead the Islamic Republic. Fewer than 30% (36 generals) believe Khamenei's son should inherit the role. Only a single general favored a cleric as successor.**



(Photo: AskIt) by Taboola

"Our 'survey' analyzes the participants' underlying mindset, not necessarily what they would say or advocate for publicly," says Dr. Neal Tsur, Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of AskIt, who led the project. "The technology builds a behavioral profile for each commander based on their life experiences, military career, and the events that shaped them, enabling predictions of how they would respond in situations you could never ask them about directly.

"At first glance the findings may seem surprising, but that's precisely the strength of our approach: we don't try to guess what any single general would do. Instead, we identify thinking patterns that cut across the entire group. When we ran additional probing questions, we found that those who favor military leadership share a dominant concern for national security above all else. This pattern is consistent with what unfolded inside Iran during the 12-day war, when the IRGC seized control of the country's governance, and with the January protests." AskIt's platform uses AI and behavioral modeling based on cumulative life experiences to understand how any individual would respond in a given situation. Unlike traditional surveys or standard AI analysis, the system does not simply prompt a language model with "what would an Iranian general think." Instead, it builds a unique profile for each person based on their life trajectory and uses it to run behavioral simulations. The technology can be applied to scenarios where no reliable historical data exists. For example, consumer audience profiles can be constructed and tested against new campaigns, concepts, and products.



The company was founded in 2025 by CEO Lotan Magal and CTO Dr. Neal Tsur. Magal served 14 years in government roles including intelligence positions. She later specialized in behavioral economics at Kayma, led by Prof. Dan Ariely, where she advised the Israeli Ministry of Finance and conducted social experiments with thousands of participants. She went on to serve as CEO of polling firm Direct Pulse. Dr. Tsur, a veteran of Unit 8200, holds a PhD in socio-physics and brings 12 years of experience in predicting collective decision-making and building AI models. He served as a lead researcher for Israeli defense agencies and the Prime Minister's Office.

**AskIt founders (Photo: AskIt)**

Lotan Magal, CEO of AskIt: "Organizations invest weeks of work and hundreds of thousands of dollars in surveys, focus groups, and A/B tests trying to guess what will resonate with their audience. Our platform creates a synthetic world of the target audience that allows you to question, test, and challenge in real time, revealing what potential customers actually think about something new, rather than the answer they'd give a pollster, which is often riddled with biases." <https://www.ynetnews.com/tech-and-digital/article/bjs0lb5owx>

## USS Gerald R. Ford expected to dock in Haifa as US sends cargo, refueling aircraft to Israel

**The USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier, is set to dock in Haifa as part of US reinforcements in the Middle East, amid rising tensions with Iran. By SHIR PERETS FEBRUARY 23, 2026 17:59 Updated: FEBRUARY 23, 2026 19:22**



*In this handout provided by the U.S. Navy, USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), F/A-18E/F Super Hornets assigned to Strike Fighter Squadrons 31, 37, 87, and 213 from embarked Carrier Air Wing Eight, and a U.S. Air Force B-52 Stratofortress operate as a joint, multi-domain force, November 13, 2025. (photo credit: Paige Brown/US Navy via Getty Images)*

**The USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier, is expected to arrive off Israel's coast and dock in Haifa on Monday, the latest addition to US reinforcements in the Middle East as Jerusalem and Washington gear up for a potential war against Iran.**

**As part of the reinforcements, US tankers, as well as cargo and refueling aircraft, have arrived at Israeli airports and docks.**

**The Ford carrier strike group, officially known as Carrier Strike Group 12, entered the Mediterranean after transiting the Strait of Gibraltar, a movement reported by multiple outlets tracking US naval deployments. The US Navy has not formally confirmed when the carrier will dock.**

Haifa suffered significant damage during the Israel-Iran war in June, with dozens injured from missile fire and structural damage to homes and municipality buildings.

Haifa is home to the [Israel Navy](#) headquarters and the largest oil refinery in Israel, which was hit during the war, forcing a partial, temporary shutdown of some secondary facilities.



*US aerial refueling planes at Ben Gurion Airport. (credit: SECTION 27A COPYRIGHT ACT)*

Another major target during the war was the Haifa port, which Iran has previously threatened to strike.

**Boosting personnel in Israel while evacuating non-essential workers**

The US has spent several weeks growing its Middle Eastern arsenal, despite already having a large presence in the region.

More than 40,000 personnel are stationed across military bases and naval assets, and with Ford's arrival, several thousand more service members will be added to that total.

In addition to boosting its presence in Israel, the [US Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon](#), on Monday evacuated dozens of non-essential personnel via Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport.

This was "a precautionary measure due to anticipated regional

developments," as first reported by Lebanese broadcaster LBCI and later confirmed by the US State Department.

<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-887655>

## Israel removed from Jordanian parliament minutes, proposing MP calls Israel 'enemy of Jordanians'

*Jordan's Parliament voted to erase mentions of "Israel" from debate on US Ambassador Huckabee's comments on West Bank reforms, calling them a breach of international law.*

By [JAMES GENN](#) FEBRUARY 23, 2026 21:46



*Members of the Jordanian Parliament sit in the plenum during a debate, Amman, December 1, 2011; illustrative. (photo credit: Salah Malkawi/Getty Images)*

**The Jordanian Parliament voted unanimously to remove mentions of "Israel" from the minutes of a debate on Monday, Jordanian and Israeli media reported.**

**The parliament debate covered US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee's statements regarding the Israeli Security Cabinet's proposed West Bank administration reforms.**

**The call to remove mentions of Israel was submitted by MP Hail Ayash, who said that the name of the Jewish state "represents an enemy to every Jordanian."**

Jordanian Parliament Speaker Mazen al-Qadi said Huckabee's comments, which allegedly justified Israel's control over "Arab lands," violated international law and the United Nations charter. "These statements are a blatant provocation and a serious breach of state sovereignty," Qadi said.

The West Bank and Gaza Strip are [Palestinian](#) territories, Qadi stated, emphasizing that any claims rooted in [Jewish] religious narratives are "unacceptable and undermine prospects for a just, two-state solution," according to anti-Zionist outlet Roya News.

*Members of the Jordanian parliament seen during an emergency meeting to discuss a potential announcement by the US to move its embassy to Jerusalem, at the parliament in Amman, Jordan, December 6, 2017; illustrative. (credit: REUTERS/MUHAMMAD HAMED)*



Roi Kais, the Arab affairs correspondent for Israel's public broadcaster KAN News, reacted to the incident. This decision came "despite Jordan having signed a peace treaty with Israel 31 years ago," Kais wrote on X/Twitter. "The proposal received the support of the head of the 'Islamic Action Front' parliamentary bloc, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan's parliament, Saleh al-Armouti, who described the decision as 'bestowing an honor upon the parliament,'" Kais added. Armouti also stated that the decision "reflects a general parliamentary consensus around national issues," Kais cited.

### **Jordanian MP calls on government to summon US ambassador**

Another MP, Ali Khalaileh, called on the government to summon the US Ambassador to Jordan, James Holtsnider, to clarify Huckabee's "dangerous statements," according to Roya News.

MP Abdul Nasser Khasawneh called for a more permanent removal of the "Israeli entity" from official discourse, proposing to refer to the Jewish state as the "usurping entity," according to the Jordanian outlet.

The phrase "usurping entity" aligns closer with Jordan's stance on national principles supporting Palestinian rights, Khasawneh said, according to Roya News. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-887664>

## **Marco Rubio's Israel visit postponed to Monday amid Iran nuclear talks, sources tell 'Post'**

**United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio was originally supposed to arrive on Saturday, but will arrive on March 2 instead. By AMICHAEL STEIN, GOLDIE KATZ FEBRUARY 23, 2026 16:54 Updated: FEBRUARY 23, 2026 19:04**



*US Secretary of State Marco Rubio gives a thumbs up as he departs at the Liszt Ferenc International Airport in Budapest, Hungary, February 16, 2026. (photo credit: ALEX BRANDON/POOL VIA REUTERS)*

**United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio's planned visit to Israel has been delayed, two sources confirmed to The Jerusalem Post on Monday. Rubio was originally supposed to arrive on Saturday, but will arrive on March 2 instead.**

**Rubio's visit will follow the third round of US-Iran nuclear talks, which are set to take place in Geneva, Switzerland, on Thursday.**

**As in the past two rounds, Thursday's talks will be moderated by Omani officials and may include Rafael Grossi, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).**

**Iran expected to submit proposal for nuclear deal**

Iranian officials are expected to [submit a comprehensive proposal](#) for a nuclear deal to the American delegation before the meeting. The proposal will be reviewed by US officials and discussed during the Omani-mediated talks.



*US Secretary of State Marco Rubio arrives to brief senators on the situation in Venezuela, on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, US, January 7, 2026. (credit: REUTERS/EVELYN HOCKSTEIN)*

According to a *New York Times* report on Sunday, US officials shared that US President Donald Trump is [considering launching a large attack](#) aimed at toppling the Iranian regime, should talks result in Iran refusing to "give in to his [Trump's] demands" when it comes to scaling back nuclear operations.

Iran is, according to a Sunday report from *Reuters*, willing to make [nuclear concessions](#) in order to avoid strikes and in pursuit of the

relaxation of US sanctions.

*Reuters, Miriam Sela-Etam, and James Genn contributed to this report.*

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-887638>

### **Slovakia halts electricity supplies to Ukraine**

*Bratislava has said it took the reciprocal measure against Kiev over the disruption of Russian oil supplies*

23 Feb, 2026 21:33



**FILE PHOTO.** Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. © Getty Images / Anadolu / Robert Nemeti

**Bratislava has stopped providing emergency electricity supplies to Ukraine until Kiev restores the flow of Russian oil to Slovakia through the Druzhba pipeline, Prime Minister Robert Fico has said, warning of “further reciprocal steps.”**

**The prime minister made the announcement on Monday, when the ultimatum he issued over the weekend to**

**Kiev to resume operations of the Soviet-era pipeline expired. The Druzhba pipeline, which connects Russia to Slovakia and Hungary, has been out of commission since late January. Kiev claims it was damaged in Russian strikes, which Moscow denies.**

Both Slovakia and Hungary have accused Ukraine of deliberately withholding supplies for political reasons and threatened retaliation. Announcing the halt to electricity supplies to Ukraine, Fico reiterated that Ukraine’s actions were a “purely political decision aimed at blackmailing Slovakia.”

“Reciprocity is a fundamental rule in international relations. The government’s first response to the hostile acts of the Ukrainian president in the form of stopping emergency electricity supply is therefore entirely appropriate,” Fico stated, warning of “further reciprocal steps” if oil supplies are not resumed.

Kiev has been increasingly reliant on electricity imports to stabilize its power grid, which has been battered by Russian strikes on Ukraine’s dual-use infrastructure. According to Fico, Ukraine received twice as much electricity from Slovakia this January as it did throughout 2025.

The retaliatory move came hours after Hungary vetoed the EU’s latest sanctions on Russia, as well as a proposed €90 billion (\$106 billion) emergency loan for Ukraine. Budapest tied the double veto to the Druzhba standoff, accusing Kiev of imposing an “oil blockade” on the country and “blackmailing” it.

Last week, both Slovakia and Hungary announced that they would suspend diesel exports to Ukraine until the Druzhba pipeline becomes operational again. Budapest has also mulled cutting emergency electricity supplies to Ukraine. <https://www.rt.com/news/632945-slovakia-ukraine-electricity-supply/>

## Hungary vetoes €90 billion EU loan for Ukraine

**Budapest has also opposed the bloc’s proposed 20th package of sanctions against Russia amid an oil supply row with Kiev**

23 Feb, 2026 19:03



**BRUSSELS, BELGIUM - FEBRUARY 23:** Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto speaks to media in Brussels, Belgium on February 23, 2026. © Getty Images / Thierry Monasse

**Hungary has blocked the EU’s proposed €90 billion (\$106 billion) emergency loan for Ukraine, as well as the latest package of sanctions on Russia, citing Kiev’s allegedly deliberate disruption of oil supplies to the country.**

Hungary placed the double veto on the initiatives on Monday as Kiev and Budapest remain locked in a bitter row over the Soviet-era

Druzhba oil pipeline – which carries Russian crude to Hungary and Slovakia and has been out of commission since late January. Kiev claims that it was damaged by Russia, which has denied the allegations.

Budapest has echoed Moscow’s stance, accusing Kiev of deliberately withholding supplies for political reasons and subjecting the country to an “oil blockade,” and threatening retaliation.

“Ukrainians cannot blackmail us; they cannot jeopardize the security of Hungary’s energy supply by colluding with Brussels and the Hungarian opposition. No, a clear no,” Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said after a meeting of the bloc’s top diplomats to discuss the loan and sanctions package.

EU foreign affairs chief Kaja Kallas said the bloc’s leadership expected the measures to be approved at the meeting, adding that it was a major setback and a “message we did not want to send today.”

The €90 billion loan was agreed to in December, when Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic secured an opt-out scheme, allowing them to not contribute to the scheme financially.

Hungary, as well as the other nation affected by the oil supply disruption, Slovakia, has threatened retaliation over the Druzhba issue, demanding that Kiev resume its operations immediately.

Last week, both countries announced that they would suspend diesel exports to Ukraine until the pipeline becomes operational again. This weekend, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico also threatened to stop providing Ukraine with emergency electricity supply unless Kiev restores oil deliveries within two days.

Fico said on Monday that he will keep his promise, raising the issue with the nation's electricity provider. In January alone, Kiev received more emergency electricity from Slovakia than throughout 2025 to stabilize its energy grid amid Russian long-range strikes, he noted.

<https://www.rt.com/news/632935-hungary-ukraine-loan-veto/>

## Moscow outlines conditions for stable peace in Ukraine

*Kiev has dismantled the foundations of Ukrainian statehood, the Russian Foreign Ministry has said*

23 Feb, 2026 23:47



FILE PHOTO © Sputnik / Sergey Guneev

**The Ukraine conflict can only be resolved by addressing its “root causes,” Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a lengthy statement on Tuesday, marking the fourth anniversary of the escalation of hostilities.**

According to Zakharova, Moscow's military action in 2022 was a “forced step” under Article 51 of the UN Charter, necessitated by the West's refusal to acknowledge Russia's security concerns. She

specifically cited ignored proposals regarding NATO non-expansion and statements by Ukrainian leader Vladimir Zelensky at the 2022 Munich Security Conference regarding Kiev's nuclear ambitions, which she claimed created “real risks.”

“Kiev has dismantled the three main foundations of Ukrainian statehood – its neutral, non-bloc, and non-nuclear status – which ensured its international recognition in the early 1990s,” Zakharova said.

The Western-orchestrated 2014 Maidan coup triggered an eight-year conflict in Donbass, which resulted in over 13,500 civilian deaths and was deliberately ignored by international organizations, according to Zakharova.

The territories controlled by Kiev have since descended into “genuine neo-Nazi obscurantism,” she said. Zakharova cited the glorification of Nazi collaborators, the desecration of monuments to Soviet soldiers, and the crackdown on the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church as evidence that the original goals of “demilitarization and denazification” remain valid.

“A lasting, just, and stable peace is possible only on the basis of eliminating the root causes of the conflict,”

Zakharova emphasized, outlining the current task of Russian diplomacy in contacts with the “world majority” and within the framework of recent Russian-American dialogue.

Russia, the US, and Ukraine held several meetings in Geneva, Switzerland, last week and previously in Abu Dhabi in January. Territorial issues – namely Ukraine's refusal to abandon its claim to Donbass – reportedly remain the key item hampering progress toward peace.

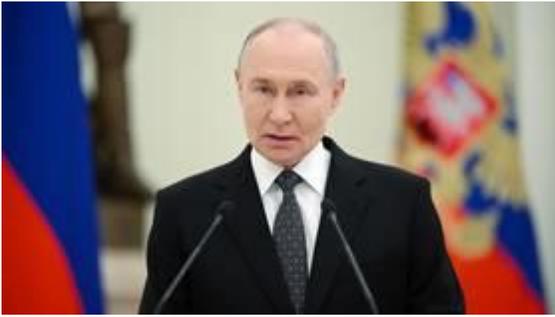
The territories in question include Crimea, which broke away from Ukraine and rejoined Russia via a referendum in 2014. The Donetsk (DPR) and Lugansk (LPR) People's Republics declared their independence early on in the post-Maidan conflict in what was then Ukrainian Donbass. The DPR and LPR joined Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions in being incorporated into Russia in late 2022 following referendums in which the overwhelming majority of the regions' populations supported the move.

<https://www.rt.com/russia/632946-ukraine-conflict-peace-zakharova/>

## Putin vows to bolster Russia's nuclear triad

*The strategic arsenal ensures “deterrence and global balance of power,” the president has said*

23 Feb, 2026 10:07



Russian President Vladimir Putin. © Sputnik/Kristina Solovyova

**Russia will continue to improve its military and technological capabilities, and the nuclear triad is an “unconditional priority” in this regard, President Vladimir Putin has said.**

**Putin made the remarks on Monday in a video address marking Defender of the Fatherland Day, as he praised service members for their dedication to defending national sovereignty, particularly amid the military operation against**

## **Kiev.**

The Russian president pledged to strengthen the army and navy using combat experience from the Ukraine conflict, and boost combat readiness across all military branches with the help of Russia’s science and high-tech industries.

*“The development of the nuclear triad, which guarantees Russia’s security and enables us to effectively ensure strategic deterrence and balance of power in the world, remains our unconditional priority,”* he said.

The address came less than a month after the expiration of the New START Treaty – the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between Russia and the US. The deal, signed in 2010, limited both sides to 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads on 700 delivery systems and required regular on-site inspections.

Despite the expiration of the treaty, Moscow stressed that it has no intention of being *“the first to take steps towards escalation”* and increasing the number of warheads, on condition that the US takes the same approach. The New START Treaty expired after the administration of US President Donald Trump signaled that it wants future nuclear arms control deals to include China – which has rejected the idea as *“neither fair nor reasonable,”* arguing that its arsenal is vastly inferior to that of Russia and the US.

<https://www.rt.com/russia/632923-putin-bolster-russia-nuclear-weapons/>

## **Kristi Noem uses unique tool to pressure Democrats on DHS funding deal**

By [Virginia Allen, The Daily Signal](#)

February 23, 2026



*U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem hosts a 'Thank You, TSA' Transportation Security Administration (TSA) press conference, thanking Transportation Security Officers for their outstanding performance amidst the government shutdown, at the George Bush International Airport in Houston, Texas, Thursday, Nov. 13, 2025. (DHS photo by Mikaela McGee)*

**President Donald Trump's Department of Homeland Security announced that, effective Sunday, members of Congress will no longer receive courtesy escorts to their flights at U.S. airports during the partial government shutdown.**

**"Shutdowns have real-world consequences," said Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, whose agency oversees the**

**Transportation Security Administration which provides the escorts.**

"The American people depend on this department every day, and we are making tough but necessary workforce and resource decisions to mitigate the damage inflicted by these politicians," Noem said in a statement.

Courtesy escorts for members of Congress and their families usually allow members to bypass security lines and move quickly to their flight with the guidance of a [TSA staffer](#) or law enforcement official.

DHS initially announced plans over the weekend to temporarily pause TSA PreCheck and Global Entry at airports as the partial shutdown continues, but later reversed course. TSA PreCheck remains open for now.

Over a week has passed since Congress failed to reach a deal to fully fund the homeland security department.

Democrats are demanding any funding bill contain major reforms to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, such as requiring agents to stop wearing masks. DHS argues that masks help to protect the identities of agents amid what they claim is a 1,300% increase in assaults against immigration enforcement agents.

TSA workers won't receive pay during the shutdown, but traditionally have received back pay when the government reopens.

The partial government shutdown is based on "stupidity," according to Simon Hankinson, a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation's Border Security and Immigration Center.

"What the Democratic leadership is trying to do is pressure the administration and to stop enforcing immigration law," Hankinson told The Daily Signal. "And how they think they can achieve that by shutting down everything except the part of the government that enforces immigration law."

Despite the DHS shutdown, both ICE and Customs and Border Protection already received billions in funding under the Trump-backed "One Big Beautiful Bill Act."

The Democratic strategy to withhold funding from DHS in order to reform ICE is an "ineffective extortion attempt," according to Hankinson. <https://www.wnd.com/2026/02/kristi-noem-uses-unique-tool-pressure-democrats-dhs/>

## Court sides with Louisiana, allows displays of Ten Commandments in classrooms

By [Bob Unruh](#)

February 23, 2026



*The Ten Commandments stand at the 21st annual Bible Reading Marathon in Stuart, Florida, on Friday, Nov. 12, 2021. (Photo by Joe Kovacs)*

**A federal appeals court has sided with the state of Louisiana, allowing enforcement of a state law calling for the display of the Ten Commandments in school classrooms. The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said a lower court's injunction against the law was premature.**

According to [the Hill](#), the court found the Ten Commandments are religiously and historically significant, and the "dual character forecloses any categorical rule against their display on public property."

"The parents (and the principal dissent) seek to sidestep this difficulty by framing the case as an attack on H.B. 71's minimum requirements alone. But an unripe challenge does not become ripe merely because a party asserts that the challenged action would be unlawful on any conceivable set of facts. The Supreme Court has squarely rejected that approach," the decision, which advances the case, said.

It said another challenge might develop once the law actually is implemented and enforced, and there is a "concrete factual record."

"Don't kill or steal shouldn't be controversial. My office has issued clear guidance to our public schools on how to comply with the law, and we have created multiple examples of posters demonstrating how it can be applied constitutionally. Louisiana public schools should follow the law," said state Attorney General Liz Murrill.

The American Civil Liberties Union and others who oppose the Ten Commandments in classrooms, were frustrated.

"Today's ruling is extremely disappointing and would unnecessarily force Louisiana's public school families into a game of constitutional whack-a-mole in every school district. Longstanding judicial precedent makes clear that our clients need not submit to the very harms they are seeking to prevent before taking legal action to protect their rights," the ACLU and others argued,

A [report](#) at World Religion News predicted the fight could end up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

The law, signed in 2024 by Gov. Jeff Landry, requires posters or framed versions of the Ten Commandments in K-12 public schools and in state-funded colleges and universities, the report said. State officials have defended the law as a recognition of historical tradition and moral foundations; critics counter that it amounts to government endorsement of a specific religious text in settings where attendance is compulsory for children, the report said. Half a century ago, a Kentucky law with a similar requirement, over the Establishment Clause — "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" — was struck down for lacking a secular purpose. But, the report confirmed, "Supporters of Louisiana's law argue that more recent Supreme Court decisions have moved away from older Establishment Clause frameworks toward an emphasis on historical practice. They point, among other cases, to *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022), in which the Court highlighted 'history and tradition' in assessing religion-related disputes."

Later, the court struck down a courthouse display but affirmed a monument on Texas state grounds.

It explained the next step in the fight – those who oppose the Ten Commandments aren't likely to give up – "could turn on specifics: whether districts place the Commandments alongside other historical documents, where

posters are positioned, how large they are, and whether they are treated as devotional objects or as part of a broader curricular presentation."

Liberty Counsel explained the judges pointed out the rules are one of the foundations of America's legal system, and also have immense religious significance.

The legal team said, "Circuit Judge James Ho, who authored a concurring opinion, stated the idea of a passive Ten Commandments display is not coercive and therefore does not violate the Establishment Clause. He also reasoned that the nation's history overwhelmingly favors religious material in education."

"Our Nation's Founders didn't just permit religion in education—they presumed that there would be religion in education. Indeed, our Founders firmly believed that our Constitution wouldn't work without a religious people," wrote Judge Ho.

Liberty Counsel's founder Mat Staver said, "The Fifth Circuit has rightly ruled that the Ten Commandments can be displayed in public schools. Passive Ten Commandments displays do not compel religious exercise, so there is no Establishment Clause violation. The Decalogue is a universally recognized symbol of law and has indelibly shaped the Western Legal Tradition and American government. There are more than 50 displays of the Ten Commandments inside and outside the United States Supreme Court. The Ten Commandments are ubiquitous and their central role in law and government pre-date the U.S. Constitution and these displays honor its historical significance to our way of life." <https://www.wnd.com/2026/02/court-sides-louisiana-allows-displays-ten-commandments-classrooms/>

## 'Refreshing change': Trump boosts religious rights in schools with new guidance

By [Bob Unruh](#)

February 23, 2026



*President Donald Trump delivers remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, Thursday, Feb. 5, 2026, at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C. (Official White House photo by Molly Riley)*

**During Joe Biden's regime, religious rights were not a priority. Sometimes they weren't even protected, even though the Constitution provides for that.**

**The American Enterprise Institute pointed out that the anti-Christian activism likely reached its pinnacle when Biden named Easter Sunday, which recognizing the resurrection of Jesus Christ is considered one of the holiest days of the calendar for**

**Christians, as "Transgender Day of Visibility."**

Of course believers in transgenderism defy the Bible's instructions regarding sexuality and imply by the very existence of the campaign that God makes mistakes and some boys born as boys really are girls, and vice versa.

The report said Biden, even while claiming to be Catholic, "Appears to harbor a grudge against the church, repeatedly targeting its practices and personnel." Further, the report said, "Biden's progressive base regularly demonizes and demeans evangelical Christians."

It continued, "The Biden team's anti-Christian track record extends into foreign policy. His evangelicalism for LGBT issues in foreign policy antagonizes Christian communities across Africa, where conservative societies tolerate homosexuality so long as no one shoves it in their face. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's removal of Nigeria from the religious freedom watch list as the Nigerian government facilitates the murder of Christians mocked the State Department's concern for religious freedom."

Now, the American Center for Law and Justice has noted the government's release of a new ["Guidance on constitutionally protected prayer and religious expression in public elementary and secondary schools."](#)

It explains, "The prudent course of action for school officials is to allow the individuals who make up a public school community to act and speak in accordance with their faith, provided they do not invade the rights of others, the school does not itself participate in religious action or speech as an institution, and the school does not favor secular over religious views or one religious view over another."

The guidance said, "This is not the familiar but legally unsound metaphor of a 'wall of separation' between religious faith and public schools. It is rather a stance of neutrality among and accommodation toward all faiths, and hostility toward none, deeply rooted in our nation's history, traditions, and constitutional law—a stance that

upholds our Constitution's 'recognition of the important role that religion plays in the lives of many Americans.' The Constitution does not enforce itself. Thank you for the central role you play in ensuring that our nation's public schools uphold the First Amendment."

The government said, "Public schools are entitled to maintain ordinary discipline and are required to protect students from targeted harassment, even when the harassing student or students claim a religious basis for their actions. Schools should be careful, however, to distinguish general expressions of religiously grounded beliefs from targeted harassment, threats, or advocacy of unlawful physical violence toward individuals or groups, which may create a hostile environment. Speech that reflects sincere religious belief and does not constitute targeted harassment, threats, or advocacy of unlawful physical violence, even if it offends, is typically protected speech." According to the ACLJ the guidance "marks a significant reversal of Biden-era guidance that minimized the constitutional rights of public school students, parents, and employees."

The report continued, "This time, the Trump administration left no stone unturned. First and foremost, the guidance reminds all public-school stakeholders of the 'larger legal framework governing the relationship between public schools and matters of religious faith.' Three years ago, the Biden administration would have preferred that the robust case law on this issue be forgotten."

It said, "Several notable changes include clarification that 'a public school cannot require a student to adopt a particular viewpoint in order to be recognized by the school if the viewpoint violates the student members' religious beliefs. School officials also cannot express hostility toward religious student groups by demeaning their beliefs.' In other words, the school cannot require a student religious club to affirm or accept cultural trends that directly violate religious tenets and beliefs."

And it pointed to another "welcome change."

That would be the affirmation of parental rights.

"The new guidance emphasizes the rights of parents to participate in public schooling in ways that are consistent with their religious beliefs. This is another refreshing change from Biden-era policies. As the guidance explains: 'The Court has, over eighty years, steadily upheld the constitutional rights of parents and their children to participate in public schooling (or not) in ways consistent with those parents' and students' sincere understanding of what their religious faith requires. This includes instances when the accommodation conflicts with ordinary school policy or curriculum and thus requires significant effort on the part of the school.'"

"The court has protected children's and parents' religious interests not only from direct coercion but also from indirect burdens, both curricular and cultural, on children's development and the religiously inflected values of their faith," the guidance states.

Explained the ACLJ, "It instructs that a public school 'may never force or pressure a child to declare or affirm something contrary to his or his family's religious beliefs.'"

<https://www.wnd.com/2026/02/refreshing-change-trump-boosts-religious-rights-schools-new/>

## OP ED

# Who Will Become the Biggest Beneficiary of the Billions of Dollars About To Be Invested in the Gaza Strip? The Terrorist Group Hamas

by [Khaled Abu Toameh](#)

February 23, 2026 at 5:00 am



**What we are currently witnessing are direct and indirect efforts by Hamas to continue governing the Gaza Strip even after the establishment of Trump's "Board of Peace" and the Palestinian National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG)**

*).* Pictured: Hamas terrorists in Gaza on February 15, 2025. (Photo by Moiz Salhi/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images)

**The Palestinian National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG), established last month in accordance with US President Donald J. Trump's plan to end the Israel-Hamas war, is about to assume its responsibilities in the Gaza Strip.**

The NCAG's main mission is to manage the day-to-day operations of the civil service and administration in

the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the war, which erupted after the October 7, 2023 Hamas-led invasion of Israel.

The committee, whose members are described as "independent technocrats," is headed by Ali Shaath, a top official of the Fatah faction headed by Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas. Shaath previously held several [positions](#) in the PA, including Deputy Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, and Undersecretary at the Ministry of Transport.

The NCAG is expected to start operating in the Gaza Strip even though Hamas continues to control nearly half of it, with more than 90% of the population still under the terror group's jurisdiction. The other half is controlled by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Although Hamas has expressed its [willingness](#) to hand over its government institutions to the NCAG, there are [indications](#) that the terror group seeks to control the new committee and turn it into a Hamas puppet.

The NCAG is already under [pressure](#) from the terror group to incorporate thousands of Hamas terrorists into a newly established Palestinian police force in the Gaza Strip. Hamas, in addition, is seeking to ensure that its civil servants be placed on the payroll of the NCAG.

Sources close to the NCAG [revealed](#) that Hamas "continues to insist that its security personnel remain in service within the agencies that will operate under the committee's [NCAG] leadership," according to the London-based newspaper, *Asharq Al-Awsat*.

"The sources said this issue further complicates the committee's ability to assume its duties in an orderly manner, explaining that Hamas, by insisting on certain demands related to its security employees and police forces, seeks to impose its presence in one way or another within the committee's work. There is a prevailing sense within the committee and other parties that Hamas is determined, by all means, to keep its members within the new administrative framework overseeing the Gaza Strip."

The news about the newly established Palestinian governance committee's preparations to enter the Gaza Strip coincided with reports that Hamas is [reasserting](#) its power in areas under its control. According to a February 18 BBC [report](#):

"Gazans say Hamas is again extending its control over security, tax revenue, and government services, raising questions about its long-term strategy, and whether it is prepared to give up its weapons and authority, as now required under the second stage of Donald Trump's peace plan."

Mohammed Diab, an activist in the Gaza Strip, [noted](#) that Hamas "regained control of more than 90% of the areas where it is present."

"Its police and security agencies have returned, and are now present in the streets, controlling crime and pursuing those it labels as collaborators and people with opinions. Citizens must go to the Hamas authorities for identity cards or health procedures, and it is also reasserting control over the judiciary and courts."

Such reports prove that Hamas is lying when it says that it is ready to hand over its governing power to NCAG. Hamas's actions on the ground demonstrate that the terror group plans to maintain its control over the Gaza Strip in violation of Trump's [plan](#), which [states](#): "Hamas and other factions agree to not have any role in the governance of Gaza, directly, indirectly, or in any form." What we are currently witnessing are direct and indirect efforts by Hamas to continue governing the Gaza Strip even after the establishment of Trump's "Board of Peace" and the NCAG.

Hamas, whose members murdered, tortured, mutilated, raped and kidnapped thousands of Israelis and foreign nationals on October 7, sees itself as an essential part of the post-war arrangements in the Gaza Strip. In the viewpoint of Hamas, the role of bodies such as the "Board of Peace" and NCAG should be limited only to paying salaries, funding reconstruction and ensuring the entry of aid supplies into the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, the terror group will focus its efforts on rearming, regrouping, rebuilding its terror infrastructure, and planning more attacks on Israel.

[According](#) to the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center:

"[D]espite Hamas' alleged willingness to transfer governance to the committee, it will have to rely on tens of thousands of employees who remain loyal to Hamas after nearly two decades of absolute Hamas control in the Strip. In such a situation, the committee will at best be able to carry out limited assistance and reconstruction activities, but most likely not to resolve core issues of control, security and demilitarization."

Needless to say, Hamas has repeatedly made it clear that it has no intention of laying down its weapons or abandoning its *Jihad* (holy war) to eliminate Israel.

Under current circumstances, where Hamas is quickly reasserting its control over the Gaza Strip, it is hard to see how the "Board of Peace" or the NCAG could succeed in ending the terror group's rule and implement

Trump's [vision](#), specifically that "Gaza will be a deradicalized terror-free zone that does not pose a threat to its neighbors."

So long as Hamas and thousands of its terrorists are roaming the streets, collecting taxes, intimidating the residents, and recruiting new fighters, the security and economic situation in the Gaza Strip will never improve. Anyone who believes that the NCAG will be able to operate as an independent governing body in the Gaza Strip is abysmally uninformed. Its members will undoubtedly be at the mercy of Hamas and its masked thugs.

Arab political analyst Mahdi Mubarak [wrote](#):

"The committee's formation did not occur in a political vacuum, but rather in an environment dominated by Hamas, which ruled the Gaza Strip for many years and established a deep military, organizational, and social presence. Therefore, any realistic assessment of the committee's future cannot ignore the existing balance of power on the ground. No matter how professional the civil administration may be, its influence remains limited if it lacks the tools of actual power or if it operates within a framework defined by a more powerful party.

"The image promoted by some international parties that the committee is a means to remove Hamas from power seems far removed from reality. The facts on the ground indicate that Hamas still maintains military, organizational, and ideological control within Gaza, and that any new administrative body cannot operate independently of its will or outside its sphere of influence. Real power remains in the hands of those who possess weapons, organizational networks, and the capacity for sustained popular mobilization.

"From this, it can be said that Hamas was the biggest beneficiary of the formation of the committee, not because it relinquished its influence, but because it cleverly repositioned itself. Instead of appearing at the forefront of the scene and bearing the cost of political, security, and economic confrontation before the international community, Hamas left space for a civilian body to manage day-to-day affairs, while it retained the keys to strategic influence. The military force is still in Hamas's hands, its organizational structure has not been dismantled, and the social networks it built over the years are still active.

"If the new security apparatus relies on elements formed within an organizational environment close to Hamas, then the separation between civilian administration and Hamas's influence becomes more theoretical than practical. And if the professional cadres—engineers, doctors, and employees—work within a social system that has been influenced by Hamas for years, its indirect influence will persist even in its formal absence from the forefront."

Hamas appears to be on its way to attempting to impose the model of Lebanon, where Iran's terror proxy, Hezbollah, has for the past few decades been able to operate as a "state within a state."

Hamas should have been asked to end its rule over the Gaza Strip and hand over all its weapons *before*, and not after, the formation of the NCAG. Since that has not happened, Hamas will become the largest beneficiary of the billions of dollars that are about to be invested in the Gaza Strip.

*Khaled Abu Toameh is an award-winning journalist based in Jerusalem.*

- [Follow Khaled Abu Toameh on X \(formerly Twitter\)](#)

© 2026 Gatestone Institute. All rights reserved. The articles printed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors or of Gatestone Institute. No part of the Gatestone website or any of its contents may be reproduced, copied or modified, without the prior written consent of Gatestone Institute.



BS”D

## STEP BY STEP

STEP BY STEP: Good news is that many friends and supporters of Lev U'Neshama (Heart and Soul) donated towards the Education Fund project to provide basic school supplies for actually 350 children within our Lev U'Neshama families.

We are grateful that the school supply part of our effort has been successful.

According to the Israel Population and Statistics office, Tzfat's population is about 40,000, and one third live at the poverty level. We do what we can so at least the children within our struggling LUN families can get the things they need.

Every week we are providing new sport shoes and eye exams/eyeglasses to the children on our request list. However, previous donations are rapidly dwindling. I am reaching out now before the fund has been emptied and we will have to say "no" to additional requests.

We work with two local shoe merchants who give Lev U'Neshama a discount but they advised us the cost of the shoes has increased. Also, we work with an accredited optician in town who also gives us a discount but his cost is stable.

Lev U'Neshama is an Israeli registered non-profit charity organization, volunteer run, no business expenses whatsoever and every \$ goes into our programs.

Shoes: \$45 per pair regular and \$60 for First Steps, baby shoes.

Eye Exam/Eyeglasses: \$60 per child.

Your support is urgently requested.

Or use the Zelle US to US bank transfer system (contact me at [mortsmo@aol.com](mailto:mortsmo@aol.com) for bank information.

US Donors may also send checks made payable to

Simcha Smolensky, my son, who is also a volunteer. Send to:

Rabbi Simcha Smolensky, 6739 N Mozart St Chicago IL 60645

**Your support will be appreciated.**

Yaffa Smolensky