

# After Gaza Operation, Netanyahu Seeks to Recover Ground

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The Israeli prime minister appears to have avoided a wider military conflict and received a boost in opinion polls, but minefields await.**

**O**n May 13, Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) reached a ceasefire deal—brokered by Egypt with involvement from the United States and Qatar—following a brief Israeli operation targeting Gaza known as Shield and Arrow. The Israeli campaign hearkened back to August 2022, when the government led by Yair Lapid also fought PIJ over a short period. Then as now, Israel hoped the larger, better-armed, and politically stronger Hamas would stay out of the fray.

## Operational Aspects of the Crisis

**A**s an Iranian proxy, PIJ lacks Hamas's broad public support in Gaza, and its rockets lack the lethality or range of those held by Hamas. Despite its military limitations, between May 9 and May 13, PIJ successfully fired 1,469 rockets at Israeli civilian areas, although roughly one-fifth landed in Gaza. PIJ also managed to fire a few rockets that reached the southern Tel Aviv suburbs and a West Bank settlement near Jerusalem.

Israel's Iron Dome air defense system intercepted 95.6 percent of the rockets on track to hit Israeli civilians, although one Israeli was killed in a Rehovot apartment building and a Gazan laborer was killed in Israeli territory. Reports suggest Israel twice delayed the start of the operation amid concerns that innocent people could be killed. Overall the operation killed thirty-three Palestinians in Gaza, including ten innocents in the opening airstrikes, according to the Israel Defense Forces. Most casualties were militants, the IDF elaborated, and some occurred as a result of PIJ misfires.

The IDF registered tactical successes by killing three PIJ operational leaders in the initial May 9 strikes, as well as three other high-level militants thereafter. In a positive step for Israel's layered missile defense, the IDF field-tested the medium-range David's Sling system for the first time, shooting down a rocket headed for Tel Aviv. As for the broader context, Israel was responding to PIJ rocket attacks on Israeli cities launched after PIJ figure Khader Adnan

died on May 2 while on a hunger strike in Israeli custody. Israeli defense officials likewise harbored concerns about PIJ's burgeoning rocket production capability in the West Bank city of Jenin.

As in August 2022, Hamas resisted reported urging by Iran to enter the fighting, and this round it reportedly even refused to shelter PIJ operatives by pairing them with Hamas fighters as shields. Rather, Hamas continued its policy of keeping Gaza quiet in order to consolidate its control and make economic gains (i.e., maintaining access for a minority of Palestinians to higher-paying jobs in Israel), while focusing on its West Bank operations against Israel.

Hamas would have struggled to stay on the sidelines had the fighting lasted longer, especially given the symbolic resonance of Jerusalem Day, May 19, which marks Israel's victory in the 1967 war. An annual march set to pass through the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City poses a security challenge, but Israel has resisted the Biden administration's requests to alter the route. The march occurred without serious incident last year, but this year Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir, who leads the extremist Otzma Yehudit party, reportedly plans to participate. Hamas, the self-declared Palestinian protector of Jerusalem, may find it harder to remain passive under such conditions.

On May 14, polls conducted by three Israeli television networks showed that nearly 60 percent of Israelis were satisfied with the security actions against PIJ. At the same time, they did not see the campaign as a turning point. A Channel 13 poll revealed that 53 percent of respondents believed it was a matter of "months" before another Gaza confrontation, whereas only 17 percent thought more than a year would pass. Military analysts interviewed on television, and even relatively upbeat analyses (<https://www.israelhayom.com/2023/05/15/winning-in-gaza-means-having-a-successful-strategy-for-the-lulls-between-hostilities/>), generally failed to offer reassurance of a long-term solution to the Gaza tensions.

## Netanyahu Rises from Lows

**G**iven general public support for short, focused military operations, the bump experienced by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-poll-numbers-bounce-back-after-gaza-campaign-surveys-show/>) is unsurprising. Yet the Israeli leader needed any help he could get following the uproar over his government's proposed controversial judicial overhaul. Support for the coalition was basically in free fall by late March amid public anger over the sudden dismissal of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who called for a pause in the reform plans. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets in protest, and the Histadrut general trade union called for widespread strikes. In response, Netanyahu was forced to backtrack, publicly voicing support for compromise talks facilitated by President Isaac Herzog.

Netanyahu's aides have conveyed to reporters on background that the prime minister does not want to advance any controversial unilateral legislation during the spring-summer Knesset session, given that it could derail passage of the two-year budget before the month's end. (By law, Israel's government dissolves if it does not pass a budget by May 29.) Undoubtedly, though, the far-right elements of Netanyahu's bloc will see the budget deadline as an opportunity for brinkmanship on various issues. Friction could center, first, on large proposed shifts in funding for the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, including increased assistance for educational institutions that exclude core subjects such as math and English. The anti-overhaul movement will see this as part and parcel of its opposition to the sweeping changes the government is trying to implement, and the sharp increase in subsidies is sure to rekindle resentment. Second, overhaul proponents like Knesset Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee chair Simcha Rothman will threaten to advance the legislation during the budget debate if the Herzog talks bog down.

The May 14 surveys by Kan (<https://www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=152132>), Channel 12 ([https://www.mako.co.il/news-politics/2023\\_q2/Article-1aaa3d0863b1881027.htm?sCh=31750a2610f26110&pId=173113802](https://www.mako.co.il/news-politics/2023_q2/Article-1aaa3d0863b1881027.htm?sCh=31750a2610f26110&pId=173113802)), and Channel 13 (<https://13tv.co.il/item/news/politics/politics/13->

[survey-903523624/](#)) would appear to offer a political path for Netanyahu. By late April, polls showed that the prime minister's Likud Party would plummet to twenty seats if elections were held right then, down from its existing thirty-two-seat position. But by mid-May, Netanyahu's party appeared to have gained back seven or eight of the lost seats. An election today could still see a bloc led by de facto National Unity head Benny Gantz triumph by anywhere from three to seven seats. Gantz's strength has impressed analysts, who had presumed—after five elections in three-plus years—that the political fight would come down to a narrow slice of soft-right voters. But at Netanyahu's April low point, Gantz appeared to have a much higher ceiling. Moreover, despite falling short in previous national elections, Gantz has gained public respect as a unifying figure intent on avoiding a culture war over the judicial overhaul.

Netanyahu understands that the judicial issue is a political lightning rod that he cannot now touch, and that his association with extremist political figures like Ben-Gvir, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, and Justice Minister Yariv Levin—who lately are perceived as being able to overpower him—is weakening him in the eyes of the broader public. A military conflict, by comparison, links the prime minister to more pragmatic, straightforward military chiefs and would appear to boost his political prospects.

## Conclusion

Netanyahu must now walk a political tightrope. On the one hand, he will try to avoid angering the coalition's ideological base, an act that will involve hinting that the overhaul has merely been postponed—not scuttled—or that Herzog can facilitate a compromise palatable to the right. Yet anti-overhaul protesters do not trust Netanyahu and believe that the issue is only temporarily on the backburner and can return at any time. Thus, protests will continue. On the other hand, the prime minister will seek to signal to the Biden administration his desire to jointly counter Iran while building stronger ties with Saudi Arabia, both of which require prior consultation between the leaders in the Oval Office. Investors, meanwhile, are awaiting a clear signal from the prime minister either that judicial overhaul is dead or that a reasonable compromise has been reached, but Netanyahu may seek to maintain ambiguity in the hope that the issue will either fade or lose its political potency.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Program on Arab-Israel Relations.* ❖

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