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READER EDITION

December 5, 2025

ISRAEL BRIEF

Friday, December 5

Tunnels Fall, North Heats, Israel Wrestles Its Own Angels

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THE BOTTOM LINE Anti-Israel networks fused street agitation, academic capture, and regulatory harassment into singular continuous pressure. Their success remains mercifully confined to superficial domains—slogans, committees, mob mentality—lacking durable alliances, travel patterns, or public certainty. Deeper currents flow oppositely: thousands of young Jews continue visiting Israel; US law repeatedly forces institutional compliance; the public—despite two years media saturation—refuses accepting “genocide” allegations when questioned directly. Israel’s challenge: hardening that second reality while exposing the first as political operation rather than moral evolution.

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IN THIS EDITION

Flash Brief	3
The War Today	3
Tunnels, Militia Chaos, and a Premature “Phase Two”	3
Southern Lebanon Learns the Meaning of “Clear the Area”	4
Inside Israel	4
Security Chiefs Aligned, Culture-War Generals Benched	4
Security First: Negev, Samaria and the Jordan Valley Get the Money	5
Autocracy Talk, Legal Theater, and a Haredi Law Built for Loopholes	5
Israel and the World	6
Between Delay and Deterrence: Tehran Prepares the Next Test	6
Diaspora Pressure Rises While Support Quietly Grows	7
Briefly Noted	8
Frontline & Security	8
Diplomacy & Geopolitics	8
Culture, Religion & Society	8
Developments to Watch	9
Northern Front (Lebanon/Syria)	9
Gaza & Southern Theater	9
Judea & Samaria	9
Regional Axis (Iran, Houthis, Militias)	10
Diplomatic & Legal	10
Home Front & Politics	10

Flash Brief

- **Gaza:** IDF eliminates Hamas's Eastern Rafah battalion commander and deputy; anti-Hamas militia collapses internally.
- **Hostages:** Israeli delegation in Cairo presses Egypt for "intensive and immediate" effort to recover slain hostage Ran Gvili's body.
- **North:** After evacuation warnings, Israel strikes Hezbollah weapons sites in Jibaa and Mahrouna; UN agencies activate contingency plans for wider IDF airstrikes.
- **Iran/Axis:** Report reveals Iran attempted to trade Thai hostage assistance for mass withdrawal of Thai farm workers from Israel; Bangkok mostly refused.
- **Chain of command:** Netanyahu appoints Roman Gofman as next Mossad chief; Katz blocks promotion of "Brothers in Arms" general; NIS 112B 2026 defense budget prioritizes borders and strategic belts.
- **Info-war & Diaspora:** EU investigates Microsoft over IDF surveillance data; academic boycotts exceed 700 cases; Birthright reopens with 10,000 new visitors.
- **Soft boycotts:** Israel competes in Eurovision 2026 as Spain, Ireland, Netherlands withdraw; European universities escalate "shadow boycotts" of Israeli academia.

The War Today

Tunnels, Militia Chaos, and a Premature "Phase Two"

In eastern Rafah, IDF forces confirmed elimination of Hamas's Eastern Rafah Battalion commander, his deputy, a regional platoon commander, and Ghazi Hamad's son during tunnel operations, bringing the tally to over 40 terrorists since the ceasefire began. The primary anti-Hamas militia collaborating with Israel collapsed: Yasser Abu Shabab, the "Popular Forces" leader who vowed to inherit Gaza, was beaten to death by his own members during internal conflict in IDF-controlled territory. His militia claims it was a clan dispute while Hamas frames it as the "inevitable fate" of collaborators to deter future cooperation.

An Israeli delegation led by Gal Hirsch presses Egypt in Cairo for urgent efforts to locate and return Ran Gvili, the last slain hostage, as Trump prepares a Christmas announcement of "Phase II" featuring a 10-member "Board of Peace" with Tony Blair, marketed as "IDF out of Gaza, Hamas out of power." Behind scenes, Iran's hostage leverage became evident: Tehran conditioned Thai worker assistance on Bangkok declaring Israel "unsafe" and withdrawing tens of thousands of agricultural laborers—a demand Thailand largely resisted, revealing Iran's strategy to weaponize foreign labor.

ASSESSMENT

Rafah advances Israel's way militarily. A decapitated battalion and starving tunnel network prove the "rogue cell" narrative false—command structures remain intact up the Hamas chain. However, Abu Shabab's death weakens the sole serious local anti-Hamas force, handing Hamas a propaganda victory while exposing how fragile any proxy becomes after 17 years of Hamas mafia governance. Trump's rush to Phase II before holidays ignores Israel's stated requirements: no diplomacy while battalion-sized tunnel formations exist under Rafah, and no negotiations while Ran Gvili remains in enemy hands. Iran's Thai worker weaponization reveals the axis treats hostages, foreign labor, and civilians as negotiating tools.

Southern Lebanon Learns the Meaning of "Clear the Area"

The IDF transitioned from warnings to operations. After publishing detailed maps and ordering civilian evacuation from Jibaa and Mahrouna zones, Israeli jets targeted Hezbollah weapons storage facilities embedded in populated areas. The army characterized targets as violations of understandings barring Hezbollah military infrastructure near borders, warning additional strikes on terrorist group facilities throughout the south will continue, preventing quiet regeneration of launch capacity.

ASSESSMENT

By publicly mapping strike zones, warning residents, and hitting concealed depots, Israel simultaneously degrades the next conflict's opening phase and establishes legal and moral documentation for expanded operations if "disarm or else" deadlines pass unheeded. Hezbollah's southern Lebanon project faces systematic dismantling; if ignored, consequences arrive over the Bekaa before further diplomatic rounds.

Inside Israel**Security Chiefs Aligned, Culture-War Generals Benched**

Netanyahu appointed his military secretary, Maj. Gen. Roman Gofman, as next Mossad director, bypassing Barnea's internal candidates and placing an armored commander wounded on October 7 atop Israel's external intelligence service. Gofman managed the PM's wartime intelligence coordination and advocated ground-force deployment, receiving public backing from the IDF chief and current Mossad director despite anonymous criticism regarding his "outsider" status. Simultaneously, Defense Minister Israel Katz blocked German Giltman's promotion—a prominent "Brothers in Arms" figure who tied service to judicial politics and refused to serve in a "non-democracy"—stating plainly that refusal preachers cannot advance in military ranks.

ASSESSMENT

Political leadership sends coherent messaging: security organs answer to elected officials, not internal factions, protest movements, or retired commanders' communications networks. Gofman's appointment strengthens a Mossad-IDF-Shin Bet alignment around October 7 veterans favoring decisive, preemptive doctrine. Katz's veto establishes clear boundaries against selective refusal proponents holding rank. While courts and ex-justices accuse the government of "dismantling democracy," the state consolidates institutional control of security apparatus.

Security First: Negev, Samaria and the Jordan Valley Get the Money

Netanyahu and Smotrich presented a 2026 budget featuring a NIS 112 billion defense allocation, lower taxation, and explicit prioritization for active personnel, reservists, and families, alongside NIS 725 million three-year security packages for Judea, Samaria, and the Jordanian border. Gaza-border mayors furiously oppose Tekuma rehabilitation budget cuts of approximately 20%—roughly NIS 300 million—blocking the Prime Minister's Office and warning the reductions will devastate rebuilding and community confidence in October 7-affected areas. Health ministry subsequently reversed health-fund reductions following public pressure, while the Communications Ministry froze 2G/3G network shutdowns after recognizing "obsolete" handsets are largely Haredi kosher devices—a pressure valve no rational official wants activated currently.

Concretely, Central Command approved seizures of roughly 1,160 dunams in the Tubas-Tammun belt for the "Scarlet Thread" internal barrier—patrol roads, trenches, embankments—designed to restrict east-west weapons trafficking between northern Samaria and the Jordan Valley, while standard NGOs declare "ethnic cleansing" and settlers counter Arab and progressive media narratives around Shiloh and Highway 60.

ASSESSMENT

Admittedly uncomfortable and contentious, but unambiguously security-focused. Smotrich and Katz signal funding prioritizes soldiers, borders, and strategic belts—Judea, Samaria, Jordan Valley, north, south—before directorates discovering "trauma" post-October 7 seek blank checks. Economics necessitate prioritization. The Tekuma conflict becomes solvable if genuine rehabilitation receives protection while bloat gets stripped. Deeper significance: the state stopped treating Jordan Valley and Samaria ridge as atmospheric "disputed territories" and now addresses them as integral security infrastructure.

Autocracy Talk, Legal Theater, and a Haredi Law Built for Loopholes

The legal front prosecutes its own campaign. The Court Administration informed Knesset that regardless of October 7 prosecution framework—civilian, military, or special atrocity tribunal—current statutory law, infrastructure, and personnel remain inadequate. Any venue requires expanded secure courts, specialized panels, and statutory modifications regarding evidence, appointments, and defendant procedures before major indictments proceed. Additionally, the Supreme Court ordered full-bench reconsideration of whether

Justice Minister Yariv Levin can appoint a state inspector supervising conflicted investigations like the MAG leak affair, having previously rejected his Judge Ben Hamo nomination on procedural grounds. Court President Amit accused Levin of “dismantling the judiciary” via public-law conference; Levin responded Amit inhabits a “fortress of lies” and that he’s systematically dismantling a court that captured the Judicial Selection Committee and obstructs basic appointments. Retired Justice Aharon Barak warned society descends toward “autocracy”—from a system still vetoing ministers, policies, and even oversight personnel.

The Haredi conscription controversy adds complexity. Boaz Bismuth’s fresh bill, marketed as historic resolution, functions practically as a yeshiva-recruitment mechanism rather than comprehensive solution. It resets enforcement, restores yeshiva funding, grants broad deferments for full-time learners, diminishes monitoring (eliminating biometrics, serious verification), and conditions substantial sanctions on missing soft enlistment benchmarks years hence. The IDF confirmed capacity to absorb Haredim the system sends; the bill instead incentivizes young men remaining “in yeshiva,” exiting labor markets, subsisting on government support until age 26, then emerging undereducated and still exempt—while the Court simultaneously demands formal equality doctrine for Arabs never practically enforced and presenting serious security concerns within the tribal landscape.

ASSESSMENT

Pattern proves stark and internally consistent. The judicial establishment deploys three-decade-accumulated instruments policing the political branch while exempting itself and favored populations from identical standards. It demands designing October 7 courts, vetoing government watchdogs, and maintaining ultimate authority regarding service, conscription, and taxation. The coalition remains partially alert: Levin rightly challenges the fortress; Katz draws genuine refusal lines; the current Haredi legislation retreats from universal service principles previously articulated. For Israel to enter the coming Iran–Hezbollah confrontation as “Israel” in the biblical wrestling sense—grappling through the night earning transformation—it requires resetting extremists and draft legislation genuinely placing black hats, knitted kippot, and secular Israelis in identical queues, not recycling cosmetically pious loophole mechanisms.

Israel and the World

Between Delay and Deterrence: Tehran Prepares the Next Test

Retired IAF chief Eitan Ben Eliyahu clarified strategic ambiguity publicly: Operation Rising Lion setback years of Iranian nuclear progression without eliminating ambitions, leaving Israel choosing between full-spectrum war—including ground invasion and domestic consequences—or renewed pressure campaigns. Tehran studies the June strike package and adjusts: dispersing missile arrays, deepening launch zones, hardening command nodes, improving deception. The region positions itself around that coming decision. Washington quietly fields new kamikaze drones modeled on Iranian designs,

signaling expectations for cheap-volume multi-front conflict. EasyJet, repeatedly suspending service during regional tensions, now plans March 2026 return with expanded Tel Aviv routes. Diplomatically, Israel signed agricultural trade agreements with the US—reducing tariffs on 300 American products, subsidizing American wheat—anchoring food security.

ASSESSMENT

Iran's messaging remains straightforward: "conflict resumes." It learns faster than international institutions adapt; signals—missile dispersal, proxy agitation, economic sabotage attempts—indicate regime preparation for renewed confrontation rather than sunset negotiation. Israel's counter proves equally transparent: consolidate US alliance, secure food supplies, reopen air corridors, preserve operational freedom while political leadership weighs options. The next round transcends Rafah or Khan Yunis; it concerns whether Israel defines Iranian thresholds or Iran defines Israeli ones.

Diaspora Pressure Rises While Support Quietly Grows

The diaspora battlespace splits into divergent realities. Hostile forces: the EU investigates Microsoft for allegedly storing "occupation"-connected IDF surveillance data on Irish and Dutch servers—a complaint engineered by NGOs monetizing anti-Israel narratives through GDPR language. In America, "intifada chic" mobs escalated from campuses to synagogue entrances. Protesters besiege synagogues demanding Jewish deaths; Los Angeles mobs infiltrated synagogue events terrorizing attendees while nursery students remained downstairs. NYC's incoming mayor Zohran Mamdani effectively blamed synagogues rather than mobs, prompting state legislators proposing 25-foot buffer zones around worship sites—importing European-style Jewish civic degradation into American contexts. Campus deterioration continues: Harvard granted teaching fellowships to students assaulting Jewish classmates; Columbia promoted professors physically excluding Jews from campus spaces. European universities in Italy, Belgium, Spain, Netherlands openly or covertly sever Israeli institutional relationships. "Shadow boycotts"—ghosting invitations, ignoring Israeli submissions, inventing ethics committees—became preferred tools for breaking cooperation without triggering funding consequences.

Simultaneously, another reality demonstrates persistent support. Birthright's first post-war cohort launches with 10,000 young Jews from 40 countries, having already brought 43,000 during active rocket periods. Programs like Kalaniyot embed Israeli scholars in premier American campuses; legal pressure increasingly forces university boycott reversals upon facing EU or American legal frameworks rather than student-government rhetoric. Public discourse shifts: national surveys reveal that stripping away propaganda terminology "genocide" and asking Americans directly yields only 24% claiming Israel intentionally targets civilians—with the largest group simply uncertain. Genocide demands intentionality and exclusivity; the public grasps this, despite activist pretense.

ASSESSMENT

Anti-Israel networks fused street agitation, academic capture, and regulatory harassment into singular continuous pressure. Their success remains mercifully confined to superficial domains—slogans, committees, mob mentality—lacking durable alliances, travel patterns, or public certainty. Deeper currents flow oppositely: thousands of young Jews continue visiting Israel; US law repeatedly forces institutional compliance; the public—despite two years media saturation—refuses accepting “genocide” allegations when questioned directly. Israel’s challenge: hardening that second reality while exposing the first as political operation rather than moral evolution.

Briefly Noted

Frontline & Security

- **CENTCOM unveiled Task Force Scorpion Strike**, a new one-way attack-drone squadron featuring low-cost systems modeled on Iranian Shahed 136 designs.
- **A leaked Iraqi document temporarily claimed Baghdad froze Hezbollah and Houthi assets** as terrorist entities before officials retracted it as “mistake,” highlighting Baghdad’s terror regarding Washington-alignment appearances against Tehran proxies—even those damaging Iraqi infrastructure.
- **Iran’s IRGC staged Gulf naval wargames** and threatened nearby US ships while displaying new AI-linked detection systems, signaling the Strait of Hormuz as leverage point—regional escalation will strike 20% global oil flows before reaching diplomatic forums.

Diplomacy & Geopolitics

- **An FDD analyst urged Israel hardening the Gaza Yellow Line** after repeated Hamas violations exposed thin IDF corridor positions; ceasefire survives only through real barrier construction, since no ISF contributor deploys suicidally undefended.

Culture, Religion & Society

- **A “Woman, Life, Freedom” mural unveiled near Gaza** honored six Iranian and Persian women, including two Jewish women murdered or killed fighting October 7.
- **Israel competes in Eurovision 2026** after EBU rejected ban attempts, prompting Spain, Ireland, Netherlands, and likely Slovenia and Iceland boycotting.
- **Academic boycotts surged to at least 700 cases**, with European universities adopting “shadow boycotts” ghosting Israeli scholars while maintaining academic freedom rhetoric, yet legal pressure keeps forcing reversals.

Developments to Watch

Northern Front (Lebanon/Syria)

- **Hezbollah Storage Grid Being Dismantled:** Israeli jets targeted mapped weapons depots in Jibaa–Mahrouna hours after civilian evacuation orders, with artillery shelling Yaroun and forward tank positioning. Pace signals Israel shaping battlespace ahead of December 31 ultimatum—clearing launch belts before next phase opens with Hezbollah already degraded. **LIKELY TO ESCALATE**
- **Lebanese Army in Narrative Panic:** The Lebanese Armed Forces issued unusual denials of Iranian media claims regarding personnel alignment with Hezbollah, preempting legitimacy crises as Israeli strikes expand—LAF appearing fused with Hezbollah risks Israel treating both as combatants.
- **UN Prepares for “Nationwide” Israeli Strikes:** UN agencies quietly activated emergency plans for wider conflict following intelligence briefings flagging potential nationwide airstrikes on Hezbollah.

Gaza & Southern Theater

- **Rafah Tunnel Command Still Connected:** Reports confirm eastern Rafah tunnel fighters maintain direct contact with Hamas military leadership, disproving “rogue cell” narratives and undermining “local ceasefire breach” diplomatic excuses—Phase II fantasies premature until underground command-and-control dies.
- **Yellow Line Breach Patterns Hardening:** Another gunman crossed the Yellow Line before IDF neutralization during corridor security operations.
- **Militia Vacuum in Rafah:** Abu Shabab’s murder and militia fracturing leaves Israeli-controlled Rafah absent local opposition to Hamas, expecting Hamas exploitation of psychological victory to terrorize potential collaborators, complicating civilian governance transitions.

Judea & Samaria

- **Qalqilya Sweep Targets Weapons Network:** IDF, Border Police, Israel Police conducted hundreds of raids, seizing rifles, barrels, explosives, arresting gunmen and dealers.
- **Highway 60 Disorder After Outpost Eviction:** Masked Israelis clashed with Palestinian vehicles near Shiloh following evacuation, causing arson and ongoing police searches; isolated incidents risk weaponization by foreign capitals as “settler violence” precisely when Israel requires diplomatic capital for Lebanon.

Regional Axis (Iran, Houthis, Militias)

- **Hamas Leadership Abroad Shifts to “Wartime Security” Mode:** Post-Tabatabai killing, senior Hamas officials abroad imposed strict new security protocols, warning Israel may target them in non-Arab countries. Foreign sanctuary strikes escalate horizontally, forcing host states choosing between territorial integrity and Hamas orbit. **LIKELY TO ESCALATE**
- **Iran Reframes Hostages as Economic Tools:** Iran’s failed Thai worker withdrawal demand reveals strategy pairing hostage leverage with economic sabotage; expect similar attempts targeting other labor-source countries, especially Asian nations, searching for pressure beneath open conflict thresholds.
- **Houthi–IRGC Coordination Visible in Yemen:** Heavy Marib clashes coincide with Iranian naval drills and Gulf threats; Tehran synchronizes regional pressure diluting US–Israeli response bandwidth when one front spikes.

Diplomatic & Legal

- **UN Pressure Tracks, US Patience Diverges:** UN signals preparation for northern conflict while Washington quietly backs IDF strikes and pushes Phase II timelines; Israel must calibrate moves holding US support while ignoring multilateral theater assuming Hamas perpetual existence.

Home Front & Politics

- **Mossad Shake-Up Rumors Stir System:** Unconfirmed resignation reports responding to Gofman appointment indicate institutional resistance pockets.
- **Budget Fights Now Security Variable:** Tekuma’s threatened 20% reduction and Gaza-border mayors’ furious responses create political chokepoints precisely when Israel requires unanimity for northern campaign; mishandling risks cracking home-front cohesion—the sole factor Hezbollah explicitly counts on.

Three dynamics shifted since yesterday. First, Rafah: a decapitated Eastern Battalion, tunnel grids remaining under centralized Hamas control, and militia partner self-destruction all push singularly—no rational Israeli government accepts “Phase II” leaving that pocket alive or Ran Gvili underground. Second, the north: publishing maps, warning civilians, and hitting Hezbollah depots while UN tells NGOs preparing nationwide strikes represents transition past “containment” into pre-war shaping. Third, institutional command: Gofman’s appointment, Katz’s refusal boundaries, and security-weighted budgets signal coherent security establishments answering elected leadership when the next round opens.

Monitor Cairo and efforts locating and returning Ran Gvili. It determines whether Trump’s Christmas “Board of Peace” lands reality or previous disarmament-and-bodies-skipping fantasy files.

The biblical wrestling moment arrives: the angel stands riverbank-ready. Israel's task: finish grappling, not surrender the match.

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