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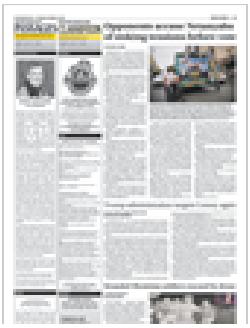
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Opponents accuse Netanyahu of stoking tensions before vote

MELANIE LIDMAN
The Associated Press

JERUSALEM Israelis entered the final 24 hours of an intense election season on Monday, as reports circulated that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may have clashed with the Israeli military over initiating a possible escalation with Iran immediately before the vote.

Tensions flared over reports that Netanyahu and his military chief of staff disagreed over an instruction by the prime minister to carry out an “action” that the army worried could reignite the conflict with Iran. Netanyahu's office denied the report, first published by Israel's Channel 12, as “fake news,” Defence Minister Israel Katz also quickly denied the report.

“I state unequivocally that there has been no intention by Israel of initiating an attack on Iran before the elections in Israel,” Katz wrote on x on Monday, calling reports of rifts between political and military leaders “completely baseless and false.” However, he said that Israel would respond forcefully if Iran attacks first.

Israel's opposition candidates aCcused Netanyahu of endangering r'egional stability for his political preservation.

Netanyahu's main rival, former military chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot, warned Netanyahu not to “dare to place your owi political interests above the security of the state.” He posted on x, “Netanyahu, my eyes are on you.”

Avigdor Lieberman, head of the hawkish Yisrael Beytenu party which is part of the opposition bloc, sent a letter to Israel's attorney general demanding a criminal investigation into possible treason by Netanyahu's “attempts to drag Israel into a war on the eve of elections, including a willingness to sacrifice (Israeli) soldiers out of fear of losing the election.”

Today's election is the first since the Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, which sparked the Israel-F Hamas war in Gaza and conflicts across the Middle East.

Israelis are deeply divided heading into what is expected to be a close race, and the veteran Israeli leader’s legacy is on the line. Netanyahu's opponents say he should be held accountable for the failures surrounding the Oct. 7 attack. His supporters say that he has led the country back from its toughest moment.

A Likud party campaign ad featuring Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Donald Trump, with a Hebrew message reading, “We have one opportunity to win,” appears on a bus in Jerusalem on Monday. Israelis go to the polls today for the first time since the Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, which sparked the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and conflicts across the Middle East. (The Associated Press)
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The vote also marks another important test for the populist right. Brazil’s voters dealt a stunning setback to the movement on Sunday, lifting President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to a surprising victory over Flavio Bolsonaro. The Republican Party of U.S. President Donald Trump, who has endorsed Netanyahu, faces a new test next week in the U.S.midterm election.

Although Israelis are breathlessly approaching the election as one of the most crucial in years, people across the Middle East aren’t expecting dramatic changes regardless of the victor. Both Netanyahu and his main rivals have similar approaches to Israel's regional secu-

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rity in both Gaza and Iran.

In southern Gaza, Jamal Abu Deeb, who was displaced from Khan Younis, said that no matter who is elected, it won't be good news for the Palestinians.

"Itis all war and destruction," he said, adding that there are still strikes every day that kill people and children across Gaza. "Do you think whoever gets elected will give us a better life? Quite the opposite."

Ibrahim Qeshta, who was displaced from Rafah, said that "they all have the same playbook, they have no mercy death and destruction for everyone," "Eisenkot is like Netanyahu, he will be the same," Qeshta said. "Our people die every day, for nothing" Iran also watched the last-minute electioneering warily.

"It makes no difference to us who ultimately takes the helm of a regime whose track record shows that it has brought nothing to our region but violence and bloodshed," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei said in his weekly media briefing on Monday.

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