

Israel-Hamas war

Qatar says Hamas 'positive' on proposed deal to release hostages in Gaza

Agreement would include lengthy pause in war and release of Palestinian prisoners in Israel



US secretary of state Antony Blinken hugs Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani in Doha on Tuesday © Reuters

Felicia Schwartz in Washington and **Andrew England** in London YESTERDAY

Qatar said it had received a “positive” response from Hamas to a proposed deal that would involve the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza and Palestinian prisoners in Israel, as well as a lengthy pause in the war and delivery of aid to the besieged strip.

Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani said the response from the Palestinian militant group included “some comments” but “in general it is positive”.

“We are optimistic,” he said after meeting US secretary of state [Antony Blinken](#) in Doha.

Blinken described the potential hostage deal as the “best path to get an extended period of calm” in Gaza as he tours the Middle East to push for the release of captives still held in the strip and for a broader settlement to end the four-month-old [Israel-Hamas war](#).

The US has been working with Qatar, which hosts Hamas’s political office, and Egypt to broker the hostage deal. It calls for a six-week pause in the conflict and comes after weeks of negotiations that were bogged by Israel’s refusal to accept Hamas’s demand for a permanent ceasefire.

The Israeli prime minister's office said Hamas's reply has been conveyed by the Qatari mediator to the Mossad, the intelligence agency that has been involved in the negotiations. Its details were being "thoroughly evaluated", the office said in a statement.

The latest iteration of the deal, agreed at a meeting of US, Qatari, Egyptian and Israeli officials in Paris last month, no longer guaranteed a permanent truce, raising questions about whether Hamas would support the proposal.

Even if Hamas and Israel do agree to the outline of the deal, which western and Arab officials hope can be used to secure a permanent ceasefire, implementation would face significant challenges.

"There's still a lot of work to be done but we continue to believe that an agreement is possible and indeed essential," said Blinken, who also travelled to Saudi Arabia on Monday and Egypt on Tuesday.

The US and its Arab allies are working on a complicated arrangement that could lead to Saudi Arabia normalising ties with Israel as part of a broader initiative that would include steps towards the creation of a Palestinian state. US officials have said that process can only happen if the more than 100 hostages held in Gaza are released and the fighting at least moves to a lower-intensity phase.

"There's a very powerful path that we can see before us to actually get to lasting peace and security and its coming ever more sharply into focus," Blinken said. "An Israel that is integrated into the region with security guarantees from its neighbours and partners alongside a practical time-bound irreversible path to a Palestinian state."

There are, however, huge hurdles to brokering any long-term settlement to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who leads the nation's most far-right government in the country's history, has repeatedly rejected US calls for moves towards the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

He has also refused to consider allowing the western-backed Palestinian Authority having a role in administering Gaza once the war ends. The PA governs limited parts of the occupied West Bank.

Blinken said he would continue to press the diplomatic efforts when he visits Israel this week.

“Everything that we do in diplomacy in general and in the case of this crisis, more specifically, is a process. It’s almost never flipping a light switch,” he said.

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