

Israel-Hamas war

CIA and Mossad chiefs to hold talks on Hamas hostage deal

Biden presses for ceasefire and warns Israel not to attack Rafah without protecting civilians



Children inspect the damage in the rubble of a mosque following an Israeli bombardment of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip © AFP via Getty Images

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

The heads of the CIA and Israel’s Mossad spy agency are expected to hold talks with senior Egyptian and Qatari officials on Tuesday in an attempt to revive negotiations on a deal to halt the Israel-Hamas war and secure the release of hostages held in Gaza, said people familiar with the process.

The negotiations, likely to be held in Cairo, come a week after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected Hamas’s demands for an agreement as “delusional” and vowed to press on for “total victory” in the [war with the Palestinian militant group](#).

Despite Netanyahu’s stance, US President Joe Biden on Monday said he would do “everything possible” to broker a six-week ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and the release of the [hostages](#).

He warned Israel its forces must not launch an offensive in Rafah, a crowded city of more than 1mn people near Gaza’s border with Egypt, [“without a credible plan” to protect civilians](#).

Biden spoke after a meeting at the White House with Jordan’s King Abdullah, who warned an Israeli offensive in Rafah would “produce another humanitarian

catastrophe”.

“We cannot afford an Israeli attack on Rafah,” King Abdullah said. “The situation is already unbearable for more than a million people who have been pushed into Rafah since the war started. We cannot stand by and let this continue. We need a lasting ceasefire now.”

Mediators hoped [Mossad](#) chief David Barnea’s plan to travel to Egypt was a sign that Israel was still open to discussions on a potential deal, despite Netanyahu’s rhetoric.

“The discussions have been constructive and there’s willingness to compromise,” said a diplomat briefed on the talks. “Barnea wouldn’t be going to the talks unless he had the go-ahead.”

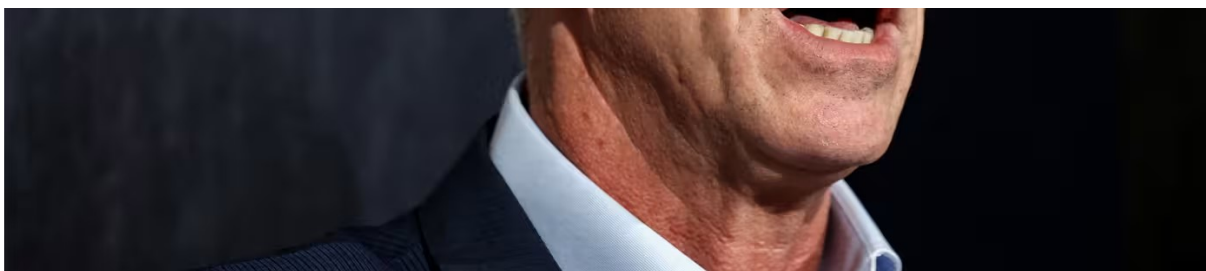
“The key elements of the deal are on the table,” Biden said on Monday. “There are gaps that remain,” he added, but he had “encouraged Israeli leaders to keep working to achieve the deal”.

Last week [Hamas](#) proposed a four-and-a-half-month ceasefire, during which it would release the remaining hostages in phases in return for Israel freeing 1,500 Palestinian prisoners, including 500 serving life sentences. The proposal came in response to a framework agreement brokered by mediators in January.

Hamas also demanded Israeli forces pull back from big urban centres in Gaza during the first phase of the truce, and withdraw completely from the besieged strip in the second phase.

The talks, brokered by the US, Qatar and Egypt, have for weeks been bogged down by Israel’s rejection of Hamas’s insistence that any hostage deal should end with a permanent ceasefire.





David Barnea, head of Israel's Mossad spy agency, is expected to meet the head of the CIA in Egypt © AFP via Getty Images

Since launching its offensive on Gaza in response to Hamas's devastating October 7 attack, Israel has vowed to eradicate the Palestinian militant group and retain overall security over the strip.

The diplomat said the critical sticking points were still the question of a permanent ceasefire — which mediators would also like to include at the end of any hostage deal — and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza.

But the mediators are hopeful they can secure compromises.

After Netanyahu rejected Hamas's proposals last week, US secretary of state Antony Blinken said that while there were some “clear non-starters” put forward by the militant group, “we do think it creates space for agreement to be reached and we will work at that relentlessly until we get there”.

Barnea and CIA chief Bill Burns most recently held talks with Qatari and Egyptian officials in Paris last month, during which they agreed to the framework deal calling for a six-week pause in hostilities for a hostage-prisoner swap. But the arrangement did not guarantee a permanent ceasefire.

After Israeli forces [freed two hostages in Gaza](#) on Monday, Netanyahu said: “Only continued military pressure, until total victory, will bring about the release of all of our hostages.”

Hamas is believed to hold about 130 hostages, including the bodies of some who have died. The group killed about 1,200 people and seized 250 people during its October 7 attack.

The latest hostage talks come as international pressure mounts on Israel to end its war in Gaza, which has killed more than 28,000 people, according to Palestinian health officials.

Global concern about Israel's offensive has intensified since Netanyahu ordered the military to prepare to evacuate civilians from Rafah.

Biden, who faces increasing pressure to do more to address Palestinian suffering, last

week called Israel's military response in Gaza "over the top". On Monday he said "too many" of the casualties in Gaza "have been innocent civilians and children".

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