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Israel-Hamas hostage talks test US diplomatic heft

Washington is caught between support for Israel and desire to halt Gaza war

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Israel's defence minister Yoav Gallant, left, meets White House adviser Brett McGurk and other officials in Tel Aviv in November © Ariel Hermoni/GPO/dpa

Andrew England, Middle East editor 9 HOURS AGO

Once more, a senior US official is in the Middle East pushing for a deal to halt the war in Gaza and secure the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

This time it is White House adviser Brett McGurk, who arrives in Israel on Thursday. Last week, it was CIA director Bill Burns — the US's main mediator in the hostage talks — who met Israeli spy chiefs and Qatari and Egyptian officials in Cairo.

That round of discussions ended with negligible progress. A day after the meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated that he would not give into Hamas's "delusional" demands and vowed to press on for "total victory".

But McGurk's trip signals the Biden administration's desperation to get a deal over the line. The motivation is not only to free the hostages, but also as a means to pause the conflict, particularly as [Netanyahu](#) threatens to launch an offensive on Rafah, the city in Gaza where more than 1mn displaced people have sought sanctuary.

The US, Qatar and Egypt have for weeks been mediating between Israeli intelligence officials and exiled Hamas political leaders. But each time they believe they are edging towards a breakthrough, they hit a wall as Netanyahu rejects Hamas's demands that any arrangement end with a permanent ceasefire.

The concern in Washington and Arab capitals is that, without a hostage deal that halts the war, initially for a period of six weeks, they have little chance of succeeding in their efforts to de-escalate the wave of regional hostilities triggered by the [Israel-Hamas conflict](#).

These efforts are taking place on multiple levels. Washington has for weeks been in discussions with Arab allies on an initiative to lay the foundations for a settlement to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This would include steps towards establishing a Palestinian state and the prospect of Saudi Arabia normalising diplomatic relations with Israel.

The US is also leading efforts to broker an agreement to end intensifying clashes between Israel and militant movement Hizbollah amid fears of a full-blown war erupting on the Israel-Lebanon border. Elsewhere, it is using military strikes and sanctions in an effort to deter Houthi rebels in Yemen from attacking shipping in the Red Sea.

Yet none of these objectives can succeed if Israel continues its offensive in Gaza, which has killed more than 29,000 people, according to Palestinian officials. Instead, the longer the war goes on and the greater the devastation in the besieged strip, the greater the risks of the wider conflagration that the US and others fear.

“It’s hard to imagine a real, parallel process of regional de-escalation happening as long as the war in Gaza is going on,” said Michael Wahid Hanna, an analyst at Crisis Group. “All of the US’s near-term objectives, and everything else, is tied up with getting a hostage deal across the line.”





People search for victims following an Israeli air strike in the Gaza Strip © AFP/Getty Images

Caught between its desire to halt the conflict and support for Israel, the US refuses to call for a permanent ceasefire. But it and other mediators would use any truce agreed as part of a hostage deal to negotiate an end to the war.

Washington hopes to at least pause the conflict before Ramadan begins around March 10, fearful that tensions will soar during the Muslim holy month. Arab states also worry that the US's bandwidth to lead peace initiatives will diminish as the American election cycle picks up.

Yet breaking the deadlock has proven to be a huge challenge.

Netanyahu has an eye on domestic politics, with expectations that he will be forced into an election once the conflict ends or moves to a much-reduced intensity. He is loath to alienate far-right politicians who are crucial to the survival of his governing coalition, and have threatened to abandon Netanyahu if he agrees to a deal they deem “reckless”.

And while he faces pressure from hostage families, opposition politicians and sections of the media to do more to free the captives, he is not alone in resisting pressure to end the war.

Rather, many in his government and large swaths of the Israeli public believe that ending the conflict with Hamas still intact, and then making concessions to the Palestinians, would be tantamount to defeat after the devastating October 7 attack killed 1,200 people.

Militants also seized about 250 hostages, 109 of whom were freed during a temporary truce in November.

Hamas, meanwhile, shows few signs of budging from its demands for a permanent ceasefire or the release of Palestinian prisoners convicted of murder in exchange for hostages — another bitter pill for Netanyahu and his far-right allies to swallow.

The general parameters of the hostage deal on the table have barely changed in months. The mediators' challenge is to produce some wizardry that convinces Hamas of the prospect of a permanent ceasefire at the end of the arrangement, while allowing Israel to avoid any such commitment.

As the one nation with significant leverage over Israel, the US's role is critical.

But even as President Joe Biden loses patience with Netanyahu, he shows no signs yet that he is willing to deploy Washington's full weight — such as by enforcing conditions on arms sales, not using its veto on resolutions criticising Israel at the UN security council, or forcefully pressing for a ceasefire — to pressure Israel to end the war.

“For all of their purported and actual frustrations, there are hard limits in terms of what they're willing to do in terms of forcing change,” Hanna said.

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