

Israel-Hamas war

Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu criticises 'ridiculous' Hamas ceasefire response

Palestinian militant group submits reply to mediators seeking to halt Gaza fighting and free hostages



Protesters in Tel Aviv on Thursday called for the release of hostages held by Hamas © Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has described the latest Hamas response to a potential ceasefire deal in Gaza as “ridiculous”, after the country’s war cabinet convened to discuss negotiations that would also allow for the release of Israeli hostages.

Qatar, Egypt and the US have for weeks been attempting to bridge significant gaps between the two warring parties as part of complex talks aimed at halting the fighting in Gaza and securing the release of more than 130 hostages held by Hamas.

Part of the agreement would also require the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails and a vast increase in humanitarian aid and supplies entering Gaza.

However the prospects for a breakthrough appeared slim on Friday as Netanyahu’s office issued a statement describing Hamas’s terms, which were received by mediators on Thursday, as “still ridiculous,” after initially describing them as “unrealistic”.

But in a sign of continued efforts, an Israeli delegation was set to travel to Doha in the coming days for further talks, according to Netanyahu.

According to a Reuters report, [Hamas](#) is offering a two-stage agreement where in the first instance Israeli women — including female soldiers — children, the elderly, and injured held in captivity would be released in exchange for more than 700 Palestinian prisoners, including 100 serving life sentences for convictions on terrorism charges. Mediators have previously stated that an initial truce would last for six weeks.

The second stage of the agreement, according to reports of Hamas's response, would include discussions regarding a permanent ceasefire, a full Israeli military withdrawal from Gaza and the release of the remaining hostages in return for all Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

“There is positive movement. But [we are] not there yet,” said one person briefed on the talks.



Displaced Palestinian children at their makeshift tent in the Gaza city of Rafah on Thursday © Mohammed Abed/AFP/Getty Images
Netanyahu also said on Friday that he had approved “plans for action” against the [southern Gaza city of Rafah](#), as he sought to increase pressure on Hamas. The premier added that Israel’s military was prepared for both the “operational side” and the evacuation of the population.

Netanyahu has repeatedly said in recent weeks that the next offensive in Gaza would target Rafah, the last major population centre in the shattered territory still controlled by Hamas. Israeli officials believe that about four of Hamas’s remaining battalions are located there, along with potentially some of the group’s senior leadership.

This week, the Israeli military said it was in discussions with international aid groups to establish “humanitarian enclaves” — likely in central Gaza — to move the estimated 1.3mn people at present sheltering in Rafah. The civilian evacuation has been a clear precondition placed on Israel by the administration of US President Joe Biden ahead of any military operation.

For their part, relatives of those taken during Hamas’s October 7 attack on [Israel](#) implored the Netanyahu government to seize the opportunity for a ceasefire and hostage deal.

“Now is the moment . . . to make a decision that will save our beloved ones,” the Hostages Families Forum said in a statement on Friday as protests took place outside the Tel Aviv military headquarters where the war cabinet and expanded security cabinet were meeting.

About 250 Israelis and foreigners were taken hostage during the raid into southern Israel that triggered the war in Gaza. More than 100 hostages were released as part of a week-long truce between Israel and Hamas in November.

Hamas has been keen to use the hostages as leverage to end the war completely, while Netanyahu remains committed to continuing the offensive — even if it is temporarily halted — until “total victory” over the militant group.

Israeli intelligence believes Hamas will attempt to use the holy month of Ramadan, which started this week, to “ignite the region” in a bid to increase both diplomatic and military pressure on Israel.

Hamas leaders have called on Palestinians to march on Jerusalem’s Al-Aqsa mosque, and to barricade themselves inside, in a bid to “defend” the site, considered the third-holiest in Islam.

Israeli authorities have bolstered their security presence around the compound, revered as the holiest in Judaism and known as the Temple Mount. The site has long been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israeli police said on Friday that midday prayers at the mosque had passed without major incident, as tens of thousands of worshippers marked the first Friday of the Muslim holiday.

The Hamas attack on southern Israel killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials. Israel’s retaliatory offensive in Gaza has killed more than 31,300 people, according to health officials in the Hamas-controlled enclave, and fuelled a humanitarian crisis in

health officials in the Hamas-controlled enclave, and fuelled a humanitarian crisis in the devastated territory.

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