

Israel-Hamas war

Diplomats hopeful of hostage breakthrough as Israel softens stance

Government of Benjamin Netanyahu accepts latest proposal from mediators that heightens chance of a deal with Hamas



A poster with a picture of a hostage kidnapped during Hamas's attack on Israel in October © Shannon Stapleton/Reuters

Andrew England in London and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

Israel has significantly softened its stance on the conditions for a hostage deal with Hamas, raising hopes of a breakthrough in diplomatic efforts to end the war in Gaza.

After weeks of deadlock, Israel had accepted a proposal that sets out an initial six-week pause in the fighting during which [Hamas](#) would release 33 hostages, said a diplomat briefed on the talks. This would include children, the elderly, women, including female soldiers, and wounded captives.

That would be followed by a second phase that calls for “restoring a sustainable calm”, wording proposed by the US, the diplomat said. Mediators hope this would overcome the main hurdle to a deal — Hamas’s insistence on a permanent ceasefire at the end of any arrangement, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government has repeatedly rejected.

[Israel](#) has also made concessions on other Hamas demands, including allowing Gazans to return to the besieged strip’s north. “It’s very positive,” the diplomat said.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken said on Monday that Hamas had before it “a proposal that is extraordinarily generous on the part of Israel”.

“In this moment, the only thing standing between the people of Gaza and a ceasefire

is Hamas,” Blinken said in Riyadh, where he met Arab leaders. “They have to decide and they have to decide quickly . . . I’m hopeful that they will make the right decision, and we can have a fundamental change in the dynamic.”

The White House said there had been “new progress” on the hostage negotiations.

A person familiar with the Israeli government’s position said it had “shown flexibility in the talks” but said it would not agree to end the war that has raged for more than six months and that Israeli troops would remain in Gaza.

“But there may be scope to find a creative framing on both issues to allow a hostage deal to go ahead,” the person said.

Hamas was discussing the latest proposal with mediators in Cairo, but has not formally responded to it. The US, Qatar and Egypt have been facilitating the talks. Previous moments of optimism have been dashed as mediators struggled to narrow the gaps between the warring parties.

The apparent shift in Israel’s position comes as the US and other western powers press for a hostage deal and end to the fighting.

US President Joe Biden discussed the hostage talks with Netanyahu in a phone call on Sunday, and Blinken was expected to travel to Israel this week. Biden also spoke with the leaders of Qatar and Egypt again on Monday, the White House said.

He urged both leaders “to exert all efforts to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas as this is now the only obstacle to an immediate ceasefire and relief for civilians in Gaza,” according to the White House.

Netanyahu has previously rejected Hamas’s demands for a permanent ceasefire and the withdrawal of Israeli troops in Gaza as he has insisted on pursuing “total victory”.

He has also ordered the military to make [preparations for an offensive](#) on the southern Gazan city of Rafah where more than 1mn people have taken sanctuary, despite western leaders warning against an assault in such a densely populated area.

Israeli foreign minister Israel Katz said on Saturday that the government would “suspend” the threatened incursion into Rafah if a ceasefire-for-hostage deal came to fruition.

But far-right members of Netanyahu’s ruling coalition have threatened to topple the government if it agrees to the latest proposal.

Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich on Sunday urged Netanyahu not to back down from a Rafah offensive, saying that if the prime minister failed to eradicate Hamas “a government headed by you will have no right to exist”.

An Israeli official said on Sunday that preparations for entering Rafah continued. “In any deal, if there is one, Israel will not give up the goals of the war,” the official said.

There are believed to be about 130 hostages remaining in Gaza, although some are believed to have died in captivity.

Male military reservists and soldiers held in the strip would be released during the second phase of a deal, the diplomat said.

In return, Israel would release Palestinians held in Israeli prisons and allow more aid into Gaza, which UN agencies warn is on the brink of famine.

Hamas seized about 250 people during its October 7 attack that killed 1,200 people, according to Israel.

Israel’s assault on Gaza has killed more than 34,000 people, say Palestinian health officials, and severely depleted Hamas’s military capability. But the Islamist movement’s top leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, who masterminded the October 7 attack, remain at large and Israeli officials assess that Hamas’s last four standing battalions are based in Rafah.

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