

Israel-Hamas war

Hamas accepts hostage-for-prisoner swap proposal

Israel says plan falls short of its requirements and vows to continue military campaign in Gaza



Palestinians in the Gaza Strip celebrate following the announcement by Hamas that it had accepted a temporary ceasefire proposal © Abdel Kareem Hana/AP

Mehul Srivastava and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv, **Andrew England** in London, **Raya Jalabi** in Beirut and **Mai Khaled** and **Heba Saleh** in Cairo YESTERDAY

Hamis has said it has broadly accepted a proposal to free dozens of Israeli hostages and secure a temporary ceasefire in the seven-month war with Israel in Gaza.

Israel responded on Monday by saying the proposal fell “far from Israel’s necessary requirements” and vowed to press ahead with its military offensive in [Rafah](#), the southern Gazan city where more than 1mn people have sought sanctuary.

But Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu’s](#) office said the government would dispatch mediators for further talks “to exhaust the possibility of reaching an agreement under conditions acceptable to Israel”.

[Hamis](#) announced it had accepted the proposed hostage release in a statement quoting Ismail Haniyeh, the Palestinian militant group’s Doha-based political leader, saying he had informed officials from Qatar and Egypt, which have been mediating between the warring parties alongside the US.

Hamis released the statement hours after Israel ordered the evacuation of eastern parts of Rafah, despite warnings from the US and the UN about the dire humanitarian consequences of a military assault on such a densely populated area.

Israel’s war cabinet voted on Monday to continue the operation in Rafah to “exert military pressure on Hamas in order to promote the release of our hostages and the other goals of the war”, Netanyahu’s office said.

The Israeli military said it was carrying out targeted air strikes on Rafah, which it considers to be Hamas’ last stronghold, and Netanyahu has said he would continue an offensive on the Gazan city with or without a hostage deal.

The details of what Hamas had agreed to in the hostage release proposal were not immediately clear.

But a diplomat briefed on the hostage talks said the proposal Hamas had accepted was broadly similar to the one put forward by international mediators about two weeks ago.

That included calls for an initial six-week [pause in the war](#) during which the Hamas would release 33 hostages, including women, children, the elderly and wounded.

This would be followed by what mediators hope would be an extended ceasefire — described as “restoring a sustainable calm” — during which the remaining hostages would be freed.

Israel would release Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, allow Gazans to return to their homes in the enclave’s north and enable a surge of humanitarian aid.

Israeli officials say Hamas is holding 132 hostages, and believe 37 of them to be dead.

“Hamas has called Netanyahu’s bluff, and put the ball in his court,” the diplomat familiar with the hostage talks said.

Washington was also reviewing Hamas’ response to the proposal and discussing it with partners in the region, said John Kirby, a spokesperson for the US National Security Council.

“We want to get these hostages out, we want to get a ceasefire in place for six weeks, we want to increase humanitarian assistance,” Kirby added.

Khalil al-Hayya, a Hamas leader in Gaza, told Al Jazeera that the proposal it had accepted included an assurance that in “its second phase, [there will be a] direct announcement of a permanent cessation of military and hostile operations”.

“We made concessions so the door can be opened to stop this crazy war and for there to be a real prisoner exchange,” he said.

Netanyahu’s office said over the weekend that the Israeli military would “enter Rafah and destroy the remaining Hamas battalions there — whether or not there will be a temporary pause for the release of our hostages”.

His far-right coalition ally, national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, said on the social media platform X that Israel should reject Hamas’ latest move.

“Hamas’ tricks and games have only one answer: an immediate order to occupy Rafah, increasing military pressure, and continuing the complete pounding of Hamas, until its full defeat,” he added.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said: “We are pleased that Hamas has agreed to the ceasefire after our calls. Now Israel should take the same step.”

“I call on all western actors to put pressure on the Israeli administration,” he added.

Mediators have for months been facilitating indirect talks between Israel and Hamas for a second round of hostage-for-prisoner swaps, following one in November.

That involved more than 100 captives in Gaza freed in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

The talks had been stalled as Hamas demanded that any agreement end with a permanent ceasefire and the full withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza.

Netanyahu, under pressure from far-right members of his ruling coalition, has repeatedly rejected Hamas’ demands.

Hamas seized about 250 hostages during its October 7 attack on southern Israel that killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials.

Israel’s retaliatory offensive on Gaza has killed more than 34,000 people, say Palestinian health officials.

Families of Israeli hostages, who were protesting on a central Tel Aviv highway in support of an agreement between Israel and Hamas, told reporters that they were cautiously optimistic of a genuine breakthrough.

“ Hamas’ announcement must pave the way for the return of the 132 hostages held captive by Hamas for the past seven months,” said the Hostage and Missing Families Forum, a group representing families of some Israeli hostages.

Palestinians in Rafah celebrated, according to images on social media, hours after panic gripped the city when the Israeli military on Monday ordered the evacuation of at least 100,000 residents, and signalled an imminent military operation.

The move by Hamas comes after a flurry of diplomacy, during which CIA director Bill Burns travelled to Cairo and then Qatar. Qatar hosts Hamas’ political office.

Additional reporting by Felicia Schwartz in Washington

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