

Israel-Hamas war

Benjamin Netanyahu's dilemma: save the hostages or his government



In one of the biggest gambles of his career, Israel's premier sent troops into Rafah to raise pressure on Hamas — and buy time

Neri Zilber and **Mehul Srivastava** in Tel Aviv and **Andrew England** in London
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Benjamin Netanyahu waited for months to send troops into Rafah, the southern tip of the Gaza Strip where more than 1mn Palestinians have sought refuge from fighting.

When the order finally came on Monday, it was within hours of Hamas finally signalling that it had accepted the outlines of a hostage-for-prisoner ceasefire proposal drawn up with mediators.

At nightfall Gazans were celebrating on the streets; by first light on Tuesday, the Israel Defence Force's tanks had taken the all-important border crossing with Egypt, the Israeli flag fluttering over Gaza's only conduit to the Arab world.

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IDF tanks enter Rafah and soldiers raise the Israeli flag on the Gazan side of the crossing © Orel Shomer Israel; Reuters

The decision marks one of the biggest gambles of [Netanyahu's](#) long career. Halting the fighting to release the hostages would leave Hamas jubilant — and many of its leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, at large. Turning down the deal to push further into Rafah would risk a fundamental breach with the US and leave the fate of the hostages uncertain.

It has made the fate of the 132 hostages still held by Hamas one of the thorniest dilemmas of Netanyahu's premiership, one in which his political career and Israel's

security are inextricably intertwined. “Either Rafah, or the hostages,” read a banner at a protest involving families of hostages that blocked Tel Aviv’s main highway last Thursday.

Faced with these stark choices, Netanyahu this week took a characteristic path: he bought time. Israel’s troops [went into eastern Rafah](#) — with the aim of raising pressure on Hamas — while a team of “working level” negotiators went to Cairo “to exhaust the possibility of reaching an agreement under conditions acceptable to Israel”, the government said.

Netanyahu’s critics cast his decision as a cynical ploy to assuage his far-right coalition partners and in effect scupper a hostage deal that might bring his own government down; to his sympathisers it was a calculated move to temper Hamas’s demands.

“It’s a nearly impossible constellation for him, stuck between the different parts of his cabinet, the different parts of Israeli public opinion, between the fate of the hostages and continuing the [war](#), with the US,” said Nadav Shtrauchler, a political strategist who has worked with Netanyahu. “The political and diplomatic and security are all connected and complicated.”



Protesters in Tel Aviv © Abir Sultan/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

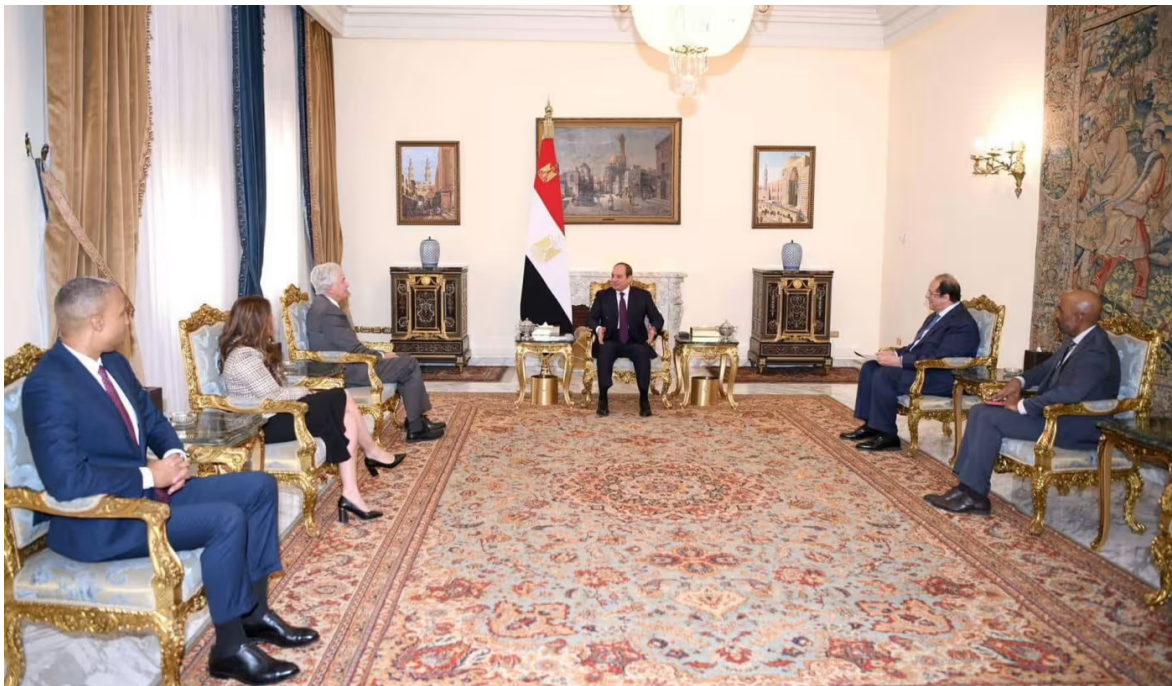
During the recent phase of hostage talks, Netanyahu had already done much to limit the manoeuvring room for CIA director Bill Burns, the head of Egyptian intelligence Abbas Kamel, and the Oatari premier Mohammed bin Abdulrahman

bin Jassim Al Thani. Deal or no deal, Netanyahu had vowed, Israel would invade Rafah — rejecting the main condition Hamas had set.

But Hamas's apparent acceptance of the proposal had an unexpected outcome: uniting Netanyahu with his political adversaries in the war cabinet — even Benny Gantz, the ex-army chief who polls show could unseat Netanyahu in a snap election, approved the order to enter Rafah.

Gantz alleged Hamas had approved terms that did not “correspond to the dialogue that has taken place so far with the mediators”.

It was a dramatic political turnaround for Netanyahu since the weekend, when a deal on what Israelis believed were the original terms seemed imminent, Shtrauchler said. “It looked like a deal was being formulated behind his back . . . and in less than 72 hours he was able to unanimously refuse Hamas's proposal and pass a decision to enter Rafah.”



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, centre, receives CIA director Bill Burns, at his immediate right, in Cairo earlier this year
© IMAGO/APAimages/Reuters

But a diplomat briefed on the frantic weekend negotiations said the proposal Hamas had accepted was similar to that previously endorsed by Israel.

One factor was crucial. As Burns shuttled from Cairo to Doha, Hamas had sought US guarantees that the deal would end with a permanent ceasefire — a long-standing demand that Israel has outright rejected.

The mediators sought to allay Hamas's concerns by reiterating that the reference to the goal of a “sustainable calm” during the second phase of the deal — language

the goal of a sustainable calm — during the second phase of the deal — language Israel had previously accepted — was an assurance intended to create conditions for the end of the conflict.

The Israeli incursion into Rafah immediately changed the calculus in the besieged enclave, said Mkhaimar Abusada, a professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University now living in exile in Cairo. With nearly 35,000 Palestinians killed in seven months of Israel's offensive in Gaza, and their “homes, schools, hospitals, roads, electricity, water lines completely destroyed”, any ceasefire would be acceptable to Palestinians in order to save what was left, he said.

“ Hamas does not have the upper hand. But neither does Netanyahu — now that Hamas has accepted some sort of deal, he is in a big dilemma.”



Displaced Palestinians set up tents on the ruins of their homes after the Israeli army asked them to evacuate from Rafah © Haitham Imad/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Some Israelis within government suspected Hamas's willingness to hold out on a hostage deal was driven by Sinwar, the group's leader in Gaza, concluding that the war was set to wind down anyway.

“He doesn't want to pay the price for something he'll get for free . . . He thinks the world will bring Israel to stop,” a person familiar with Israel's war plans said about Sinwar, one of the masterminds of the October 7 attack on Israel, in which 1,200 people were killed and 240 taken hostage, according to Israeli officials.

Israel's incursion into Rafah has brought intense international condemnation,

from the EU to Saudi Arabia. It is also in clear defiance of US President Joe Biden, who has pushed for an end to the war and warned that a Rafah operation that endangers Palestinian civilians is a red line for him.

For Egypt, the matter is viewed as a grave threat to national security, with fears that fierce fighting between the IDF and Hamas along its 14km border with Gaza would lead to an exodus of tens of thousands of desperate Palestinians into its Sinai peninsula.

“The Egyptians are terrified [and they are] angry and exhausted with Israel,” said an Israeli official familiar with the debates between Israel and Egyptian intelligence officers. “They see a deal they’ve produced, and suddenly, Israel won’t sign.”

Egypt is concerned that fighting in Rafah could lead to an exodus of Palestinians into its Sinai peninsula





Source: Planet Labs May 6 2024

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The fate of the negotiations now hangs on fine details, according to one diplomat involved in the frantic shuttle diplomacy. The draft proposal broadly offers the chance for 33 Israeli hostages — including women, children, the elderly and wounded — to be freed in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners; permission for Gazans to return to the north of the strip; and a surge in humanitarian aid.

This would be followed by what mediators hoped would be an extended ceasefire, during which the remaining hostages would be freed. Mediators proposed language on a “sustainable calm” in a bid to break the deadlock over Hamas’s calls for a permanent ceasefire and Israel’s insistence that any deal would not result in an end to the war.

At least 37 of the 132 hostages held in Gaza may already be dead, Israeli officials believe. Many are wounded; others are elderly. If talks to free them prove fruitless, Netanyahu would have little option but to invade the entirety of Rafah, despite the humanitarian costs and diplomatic blowback.

“The political grounds are very narrow — if there is any ground at all,” said Israel Ziv, a retired major-general who headed the Gaza Division in the IDF. “If there is no deal, he has to go to Rafah. And going to Rafah means that he has to face the consequences.”

Netanyahu’s reluctance — during decades of resisting international pressure — to concede even the smallest of concessions to the Palestinians has exhausted any faith that his critics had in his motivations.

Yair Golan, a retired Israeli general and leftwing politician, said he would be supportive if sending Israeli troops into Rafah was a tactical move to raise pressure

on Hamas to reach a hostage deal. But he is sceptical.

“The prime minister has undermined past negotiation attempts, so this could just be a way to avoid ending the war, and to buy time,” Golan said. “The central question is: does Netanyahu really want a deal or not? My conclusion is that he doesn’t, for political reasons.”

Satellite visualisation by Jana Tauschinski

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