

Israel-Hamas war

Hamas denies 'backing off' from Gaza ceasefire talks

Joe Biden claimed militant group was cooling on deal to end war and free hostages



US secretary of state Antony Blinken, left, meets Egypt’s foreign minister Badr Abdelatty at El-Alamein on Tuesday © Pool/AFP/Getty Images

James Shotter in Jerusalem and **Andrew England** in London YESTERDAY

Hamas has rejected President Joe Biden’s claim that it is “backing off” from a ceasefire-for-hostages deal, while insisting that the US is yielding to Israel’s interests in crunch negotiations.

A statement from the Palestinian militant group on Tuesday stopped short of outright rejection of a compromise proposal drawn up by mediators, but underlined the daunting challenges that remained to secure a deal to end the [war in Gaza](#).

Biden’s chief diplomat Antony Blinken declared on Monday that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had supported a so-called bridging text, which aimed to resolve outstanding points of dispute between the two sides.

People familiar with the latest talks said they had focused on the question of Israel’s presence on the border between Egypt and Gaza, known as the Philadelphi corridor, which has emerged as one of the main sticking points.

But Biden later on Monday said that while a potential deal — which the US and Arab states see as the best way of avoiding a regional war in the Middle East — was “still in play”, he had been told “Hamas is now backing off”.

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Hamis said on Tuesday it was "astonished" by Biden's comments and accused the US, which along with Qatar and Egypt has been mediating the months-long ceasefire talks, of being biased towards Israel.

"[Biden's remarks] do not reflect the true position of the movement, which is keen to reach a cessation of aggression," Hamas said.

The Philadelphi corridor is a key point of contention in Gaza ceasefire talks

- Ongoing Israeli ground operation
- Israeli military buffer zones (100m, 300m, 1,000m)
- Refugee camp area
- Humanitarian area as of Aug. 13



*The Gaza-Egypt border region is known as the Philadelphi corridor. Last updated: August 14. Sources: FT research, Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, Gisha, OpenStreetMap, IDF © FT

The [US](#) last week put forward the bridging proposal, based on a three-stage ceasefire plan set out by Biden in May, aimed at overcoming the gaps that remain between Israel and Hamas over the terms of any deal.

Biden's original three-stage plan specified that Israel would withdraw from the populated areas of Gaza in the first phase, and completely in the second phase.

But Netanyahu has in recent weeks repeatedly insisted that Israeli forces remain in the Philadelphi corridor — a demand rejected by Hamas, which has called the bridging proposal a “coup” against terms it had previously agreed.

A diplomat briefed on the talks said the bridging proposal included a reduced Israeli presence in the corridor but that crucial details remained to be finalised.

“It's not clear what the timeframe is for the presence or what reduced presence means and whether they continue to control exit and entry through [the] Rafah [border crossing],” the diplomat said.

Another point of contention is the terms under which Israel would free Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the release of Israeli hostages taken by Hamas in its deadly October 7 attack on the Jewish state.

The diplomat said Netanyahu was demanding that Israel be able to veto a large number of prisoners being freed, and wanted some to be released only into exile.

Blinken was in Cairo on Tuesday for talks with Egyptian officials, including President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi. He is due to visit Doha this week.

Earlier on Tuesday, Israel's military confirmed it had retrieved the bodies of six hostages from Gaza who had been seized by Hamas on October 7.

The military's chief spokesman, Daniel Hagari, said the circumstances of their deaths in captivity were being investigated.

“The [military] is working every day and night to gather more intelligence, create more operational opportunities for hostage rescues,” he added.

“But we cannot bring everyone back through rescue operations alone, therefore we are working on all efforts.”

