

Israel-Hamas war

US backs Israeli goal of 'eradicating' Hamas in Gaza

Secretary of state Marco Rubio's comments raise concerns over Washington's commitment to fragile ceasefire deal



US secretary of state Marco Rubio, left, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shake hands during a news conference in Jerusalem on Sunday © Ohad Zwigenberg/AP

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

US secretary of state Marco Rubio has backed Israel's goal of "eradicating" Hamas in Gaza, throwing into doubt Washington's commitment to a fragile ceasefire deal it helped broker last month.

Speaking alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday in Jerusalem, Rubio struck a hardline position, making clear that the remaining [Israeli hostages](#) in Gaza "need to be released" and that the Palestinian militant group could no longer rule the shattered enclave.

"Hamas cannot continue as a military or government force [in Gaza] . . . They must be eliminated, [they] must be eradicated," Rubio said.

Rubio also referred to US President Donald Trump's recent comments about removing much of Gaza's population in order to redevelop the territory, calling it a "bold" view of its future and arguing that otherwise the "same cycle . . . will repeat over and over again".

The plan, which envisages countries such as Egypt and Jordan taking in Palestinians, has been rejected by most Arab leaders, who would be loath to be seen as complicit in the forced displacement of Palestinians, and fearful that it would threaten regional

stability and their own security.

The US, along with Egypt and Qatar, helped mediate an initial 42-day truce to the Gaza conflict. So far, 19 Israelis and 5 Thai foreign workers taken hostage during Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on the Jewish state have been released, alongside hundreds of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails. The truce is about to enter its fifth week.

More than 70 Israelis remain in captivity, of which 14 are expected to be released in the coming two weeks, according to the terms of the ceasefire deal — although both Israeli and US officials are now insisting that the timeframe be sped up.

“We're not in favour of waiting weeks and weeks,” Rubio told CBS News, adding that the US wanted to see an undefined number released “as soon as possible”.

Negotiations over a second stage have yet to begin and are two weeks behind schedule, amid mutual recriminations between Israel and Hamas over alleged violations. A second phase would probably require a permanent end to the war, the full withdrawal of the Israeli military from Gaza, and the release of the remaining hostages.

Steve Witkoff, Trump's Middle East envoy, told Fox News on Sunday that talks would take place over the coming week at an undefined location in a bid to “get to the end of phase 2 successfully”.

Netanyahu's office stated that, after a call from Witkoff, the premier would finally convene his security cabinet on Monday to discuss a second-phase plan. The long-serving Israeli leader has repeatedly called for nothing short of “total victory” over Hamas.

Standing alongside Rubio, Netanyahu reiterated that Israel was still committed to all of its war goals in Gaza, including “eliminating” Hamas's military capabilities and political rule in the territory and bringing home all of the hostages.

“President Trump and I are working in full co-operation and co-ordination,” Netanyahu said.

“We have a common strategy, and we can't always share the details of this strategy with the public — including when the gates of hell [on Hamas] will be opened, as they surely will if all our hostages are not released,” he added.

Netanyahu also highlighted what he described as Trump's “bold vision for Gaza”,

telling Rubio that the two countries would “work together to ensure that future becomes a reality”.

Additional reporting by James Politi in Washington

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