

## Middle Eastern politics & society

# US rejects Hamas response to new Gaza ceasefire proposal

Washington's envoy urges militant group to accept pause in fighting and to release Israeli hostages



Protesters hold photos of hostages held in the Gaza Strip by Hamas during a rally calling for a hostages deal on May 31 in Tel Aviv © Getty Images

**Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv

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US envoy Steve Witkoff has rejected Hamas's response to a fresh ceasefire proposal in the Gaza war as "totally unacceptable".

Hamas had earlier responded positively to the release of a comparable number of Israeli hostages, but raised "clarifications" regarding the overall deal, according to a diplomat briefed on the talks.

The militant group also insisted that its goal was still to permanently end the war, secure a comprehensive Israeli military withdrawal from Gaza, and guarantee increased humanitarian aid flows.

"I received the Hamas response to the United States' proposal. It is totally unacceptable and only takes us backward," Witkoff said in a statement.

"Hamas should accept the framework proposal we put forward as the basis for proximity talks, which we can begin immediately this coming week."

Witkoff's new proposal called for a 60-day pause in the fighting, the release of half the 58 remaining Israeli hostages, 20 of whom are still alive, and "good faith negotiations" over a permanent halt to the war.

The Trump administration indicated this week that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had accepted the terms, although he has consistently rejected ending the fighting before Hamas is completely destroyed.

Netanyahu's office on Saturday night said that while Israel had accepted the proposal, "Hamas continues to stick to its refusal," and vowed "to continue operations for the return of our hostages and the defeat of Hamas."

The Israel Defense Forces on Saturday confirmed that Hamas's military chief, Mohammed Sinwar, and several other senior commanders were killed in a May 13 air strike in the city of Khan Younis in south Gaza. According to the IDF, the group was targeted while in a tunnel located below the grounds of the city's European hospital.

Sinwar took overall command of Hamas's forces last year, after most of the group's other top leaders — including his brother, Yahya — were previously killed by Israel.

Also on Saturday, Israel blocked the entry of several Arab foreign ministers to the occupied West Bank, calling it a provocative move aimed at promoting the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Israeli veto came ahead of a visit on Sunday to Ramallah, the administrative capital of the Palestinian Authority, by a high-level delegation including Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister.

It would have been the first official visit by a senior Saudi official to the territory which was seized by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Successive US administrations have sought to normalise relations between the kingdom and Israel.

Other members of the delegation included the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan and Bahrain — all Arab states that have diplomatic ties with Israel.

An Israeli official said with regard to the refusal to allow the Arab delegation into the West Bank that the Palestinian Authority “intended to host . . . a provocative meeting of foreign ministers from Arab countries to discuss the promotion of the establishment of a Palestinian state . . . [that] would undoubtedly become a terrorist state in the heart of the Land of Israel”.

“Israel will not co-operate with such moves aimed at harming it and its security,” the official added.

International pressure on Israel has intensified in recent weeks, primarily over its renewed offensive in Gaza and the dire humanitarian conditions in the enclave.

Much of the [international community](#) views the West Bank, alongside East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, as the basis of a future Palestinian state.

France and Saudi Arabia are set to host a summit in New York next month on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with several western governments, including the UK, considering recognising a Palestinian state.

Jordan’s foreign ministry said that the denial of entry to the delegation was a “blatant violation of Israel’s obligations as the occupying power” in the West Bank and reflected “the extent of the Israeli government’s arrogance, its disregard for international law and its continued illegitimate measures and policies”.

The Palestinian ambassador in Riyadh told Saudi state news television channel Al-Ekhabariya on Friday that the “rare” visit sought to mobilise support for a two-state solution ahead of the conference in New York.

On Thursday the Israeli government announced the creation of 22 new settlements across the West Bank, the biggest expansion in years of an enterprise that many governments consider illegal.

Israeli ministers described the decision as a “decisive response” to Palestinian militancy and a “strategic move that prevents the establishment of a Palestinian

state”.

Nearly 500,000 Jewish Israelis have settled in the West Bank over the past five decades. About 3mn Palestinians live in the territory under Israeli military rule and partial autonomy administered by the Palestinian Authority.

*Additional reporting by Ahmed Al Omran in Jeddah and Andrew England in London*

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