

# [***Talks on a Gaza deal are at an impasse. Here's what we know***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BBG-BSD1-JBSS-S04T-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Talks on a [*hostage and ceasefire deal*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/qatar-israel-hamas-hostage-talks-progress/index.html) for Gaza appear to be at an impasse. Israel's top-level delegation has returned from Cairo, and there has been no word from Hamas on its position in recent days.

[*Hamas*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-attack-strategy-israel-mime-intl/index.html) made a detailed proposal this month for a four-and-a-half-month ceasefire and prisoner exchange deal. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [*dismissed it as "delusional"*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/middleeast/hamas-counterproposal-israel-pullout-ceasefire-hostages-intl/index.html) at the time, but indirect talks in Cairo continued as Israel faced pressure from its allies to negotiate, and Hamas faced the prospect of a [*major Israeli offensive*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/14/middleeast/rafah-international-opposition-israel-ground-offensive-intl-hnk/index.html) in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where over a million Palestinians are sheltering.

CIA Director Bill Burns met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mossad Director David Barnea in Israel on Thursday to discuss the state of hostage negotiations, an Israeli official confirmed.

People familiar with the negotiations say there are a number of sticking points. Here's what we know.

What's on the table?

In response to a framework agreement presented by negotiators in Paris at the end of last month, Hamas presented a counterproposal that envisaged a three-stage process over four-and-a-half months.

During the process, Israeli troops would gradually withdraw from Gaza, hostages would be released and Palestinian prisoners in Israel - including those serving life sentences - would be freed.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed Hamas' proposal. "We haven't committed to any of the delusional demands of Hamas," he said last week.

The Israeli leader [*has repeatedly said*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-30-24/h_38f5ddbe09b48b28e1ba4a051c858855) that the war in Gaza will continue until Israel destroys Hamas' leadership and rescues the hostages.

Israeli negotiators presented feedback on Hamas' proposed deal earlier this week, a source familiar with the negotiations told CNN, and Qatar - a mediator in the talks - is now waiting for a response from Hamas.

"Qatar are talking to Hamas in Doha and waiting for their (Hamas) response to the Israeli feedback from the Cairo meeting," the source said.

What are the sticking points?

A number of sticking points have emerged during the negotiations: the ratio of Palestinian prisoners to hostages that would be released, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, and the status of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

[*Hostage talks were held Tuesday*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-02-13-24/h_325b0d2a1a3c91544eac61ea7b68be05) in the Egyptian capital Cairo, where a US official said the outstanding area of disagreement was the ratio of Palestinian prisoners to hostages that would be released as part of the deal.

Israel continues to insist on a three-to-one ratio of Palestinian prisoners to hostages that was included in the deal in November 2023.

Another source familiar with the talks told CNN on Thursday that another major sticking point remains the Israeli withdrawal of troops from Gaza - Hamas wants a full withdrawal during any truce, a demand that Israel is resisting

[*Netanyahu last month*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-30-24/h_38f5ddbe09b48b28e1ba4a051c858855) said he "will not release thousands of terrorists," as part of a deal with Hamas, and said that Israel would not pull troops out of Gaza.

A third point of contention is the status of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Only Muslims are allowed to pray in the compound under a status quo arrangement originally reached more than a century ago. Non-Muslim visitors are allowed visits at certain times and only to certain areas of the complex. But many in the Muslim world fear that the right to be the sole worshipers there [*has been eroded*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/12/middleeast/inside-al-aqsa-mosque-status-quo-mime-intl/index.html) and that the sites themselves are being threatened by a growing far-right Jewish movement and Israel's hard-right government. "The status of al-Aqsa is not going to be resolved in a negotiation over hostages," US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Wednesday, calling it one of the "obvious nonstarters" from Hamas.

Another complicating factor is the difficulty in communicating with Hamas' senior leadership in Gaza. Even as talks continue in Cairo, the Israeli military has been conducting operations in Gaza designed to hunt down top Hamas figures.

Why is Netanyahu holding out?

Netanyahu leads [*the most right-wing government*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/25/politics/us-israel-democracy-analysis/index.html) in Israel's history. Some members of that government are strongly [*opposed to any compromise*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/17/middleeast/israel-far-right-gaza-settler-movement-cmd-intl/index.html#:~:text=Its%20ideas%20are%20gaining%20attention,-By%20Mick%20Krever&text=Editor's%20Note%3A%20A%20version%20of,inside%20the%20region's%20biggest%20stories.) that involves releasing Palestinian prisoners or withdrawing from Gaza. If those ministers resign, Netanyahu's coalition could fall apart, leading to new elections, possibly spelling the end of his political career at a time when he is also facing corruption charges.

Against that backdrop, US officials are increasingly concerned about whether Netanyahu is genuinely interested in reaching a hostage deal at the present time. People briefed on the discussions have also noted that his top security officials from Mossad and Shin Bet, who have been acting as envoys for the hostage talks, are seen as much more pragmatic in trying to hammer out an agreement with other mediators. There are others in the War Cabinet, like former IDF chief Gadi Eisenkot, who have criticized Netanyahu's failure to prioritize the hostages.

Since the onset of the war, US officials have been highly sensitive to the domestic ***politics*** that are at play for Netanyahu - and how they have shaped some of his key decisions and public stances surrounding the conflict. Netanyahu's political future has been a wild card of sorts that administration officials have contended with.

The Israeli prime minister on Wednesday said that Hamas must change its negotiating position before talks can continue in Cairo.

"In Cairo, Israel was not given any new proposal by Hamas for the release of our hostages," Netanyahu's office said in a statement. "A change in Hamas' positions will allow progress in the negotiations."

Netanyahu, however, is also under intense pressure [*from families of hostages*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/14/middleeast/israeli-hostage-families-war-crimes-complaint-intl/index.html) to prevent the deaths of the remaining captives in Gaza and return to negotiations. On Thursday, the families intensified their efforts to ensure that the government doesn't "sacrifice the hostages."

What does the US think?

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Thursday that he believes an agreement to release the hostages and secure a "humanitarian pause" is both "possible" and also "imperative."

"We're now in the process with our counterparts from Qatar, from Egypt, from Israel, in working on that and working very intensely on that with the goal of trying to find an agreement," he said at a press conference in Albania. "There are some very, very hard issues that have to be resolved, but we're committed to doing everything we can to move forward and to see if we can reach an agreement."

US President Joe Biden [*has said he hopes*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/02/12/remarks-by-president-biden-and-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-of-jordan-after-a-meeting/) that a ceasefire deal, which would see the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, could lead to a more lasting peace "on the basis of the two-state solution."

The US is working with its Arab partners to try to establish a plan for Israel and Gaza after the conflict ends, one that includes "a concrete, time-bound, irreversible path to a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel, with the necessary security assurances."

A senior State Department official said if there is a cessation in the fighting, the US wants "to be in a position to move as quickly as possible on the various pieces of the 'day after.'"

A similar report about a "comprehensive plan" for peace including a two-state solution published in The Washington Post was met with strong rejection from Netanyahu's office as well as Israeli politicians. A spokesperson in Netanyahu's office on Thursday rejected any discussion, for the moment, about a Palestinian state, saying that "now is not the time to be speaking about gifts for the Palestinian people."

Miller, the State Department spokesperson, said Wednesday that he would not "give a day-by-day, step-by-step update or assessment on the talks, or the status of them, or where they might stand; but we continue to believe that it is possible to achieve a deal."

"We continue to believe it's in the national security interest of the United States to achieve deal," he said. "We believe it's in the interest of both Israel and, of course, the Palestinian people. So we will continue to work to try and achieve an agreement that would not just secure the release of hostages, but, of course, enable - allow a pause that would enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance that would alleviate the suffering on the ground in Gaza."

CNN's Mick Krever, Lauren Izso, Amir Tal, Mostafa Salem, Abeer Salman and Ibrahim Dahmam contributed reporting.

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