

Reminder: The Hostages (or: Why an ‘All for All’ Deal Doesn’t Help Them)

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

Sep 24, 2024

Also published in Times of Israel

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Articles & Testimony

The impasse in negotiations boils down to a choice between getting the hostages out or staying in Gaza—and Netanyahu has seemingly picked the latter.

The focus on the Israel-Hezbollah attacks has eclipsed the focus on both Gaza and the hostages. As the country is about to commemorate the horrors of October 7th, the families of the hostages increasingly feel that their cause is treated like yesterday’s news, especially in light of the possibility of a new war in Lebanon.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [reportedly told \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-09-22/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-reportedly-tells-mks-half-the-hostages-held-by-hamas-in-gaza-are-alive/00000192-1a92-d417-abb6-dab61d690000?lts=1727126832983\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-09-22/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-reportedly-tells-mks-half-the-hostages-held-by-hamas-in-gaza-are-alive/00000192-1a92-d417-abb6-dab61d690000?lts=1727126832983) the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee this week that only half of the 101 hostages are still alive. Some hostage families have noted that this means more than the [estimated third dead \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-more-than-third-gaza-hostages-are-dead-2024-06-04/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-more-than-third-gaza-hostages-are-dead-2024-06-04/), as has been acknowledged by the Israel Defense Forces.

Officials in the US and Israel admit that the hostage talks are stuck. Last week, a Biden administration official went so far as to say that he doubted a deal would be reached until the end of the American president’s term. At the center of the impasse is the question of the viability of the organizing principle that has animated the hostage talks for many months: a phased ceasefire in return for a partial hostage release. The current impasse raises the question of whether there is an alternative idea that could revive the hostage talks.

The hostage impasse is not just terrible news for the hostage families and the Israeli people, but also for the United States. Several of the [hostages are also US citizens \(https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/american-hostages-hamas-gaza-kidnapped-rcna170170\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/american-hostages-hamas-gaza-kidnapped-rcna170170), and one of the hostages who died in the tunnels last month, [Hersh](#)

Goldberg-Polin (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/hersh-goldberg-polin-israeli-american-hostage-killed-gaza-rcna169134>), was an American citizen.

Beyond the actual hostages themselves, US diplomacy has bet that a hostages-for-ceasefire deal would be the vehicle not only to end the Israel-Hamas war, but also to shut down the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel in the north. The hope was that even a temporary ceasefire of six weeks could be extended and could enable the Biden administration to determine whether a ceasefire in Gaza could be key for Saudi-Israeli normalization, **a proposition encouraged by Riyadh (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/us-saudi-arabia-defense-treaty-israel-palestine-e2cc1821>)**.

At the heart of the US concept for the last many months, shared by the other two mediators (Qatar and Egypt) was the **idea of a three-phase ceasefire (<https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/qatar-israel-hamas-hostage-talks-progress/index.html>)**. This concept had appeal for both Israel and Hamas. Israel liked the phased approach because it could avoid committing to a full withdrawal from Gaza during phase one. Hamas liked this approach, as it required them to release only 33 of the estimated 101 hostages, allowing leader Yahya Sinwar to keep human shields in place that would ostensibly limit Israel's efforts to kill him.

In other words, the phased approach allowed both parties to delay their most significant concessions. Israel would not have to withdraw from Gaza immediately, and Hamas would not have to release the hostages all at once. The second phase was designed to address the most contentious issues, while the third phase would involve the exchange of bodies from both sides. Yet now this paradigm of a phased ceasefire seems to be unraveling for different reasons that are not mutually exclusive.

Of course, it is fair to question whether Sinwar ever truly agreed to the phased approach. Some say he did. He wants the release of as many of the estimated almost 600 life-time prisoners convicted in court for terror largely against civilians included in the deal as possible—individuals to whom he promised, 13 years ago in prison, that he would push for their release. Those who think he would agree to a phased deal would point to the very detailed multi-page documents of May 6th and July 2nd, submitted by Hamas. Whenever Hamas is asked to go beyond their July 2nd document, **they point to it as the limit of their flexibility (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4gex1rl6q5o>)**. Some wonder if the reports of the **disappearance of Sinwar (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-09-22/ty-article/.premium/israel-investigating-if-sinwar-wounded-killed-or-has-severed-contact-with-outside-world/00000192-1b33-ddf9-a9fa-7f7f3cba0000>)** are tied to this. He does not seem reachable, leading to rumors that he may have died in an Israeli strike, although it is also possible that Sinwar made himself unreachable to the mediators—via couriers—so he cannot make further concessions.

Others will say that it is hard to fathom Sinwar's actions fully, given his utter disregard for the destruction of Gaza. He is cited in **The Wall Street Journal (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/gaza-chiefs-brutal-calculation-civilian-bloodshed-will-help-hamas-626720e7>)** as saying that many need to die on the Palestinian side for victory to be reached. Citing the number of Algerians who were killed for the cause of Algerian independence, he reportedly told Hamas members in Doha, "These are necessary sacrifices." Ministers in the Israeli cabinet briefed by the intelligence community call him a "sociopath." Others say his self-image is of a modern **Saladin (<https://jcpa.org/yahya-sinwar-is-working-to-fulfill-sheikh-ahmed-yassins-vision/>)**, who cares more about the verdict of Arab history than the tactics of negotiations.

And yet some argue that his calculations are more sophisticated than that. Sinwar has seen international public opinion blaming Israel for the impasse of talks, so why not hold out? Maybe a war in Lebanon would reignite Sinwar's unfulfilled October 7th dream for a regional war. In addition, with Israel now deploying **significantly fewer (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-chief-says-withdrawal-of-troops-from-gaza-doesnt-mean-war-is-close-to-end/>)** troops than it had in Gaza during the early stages of the war, he might argue that there is no longer any real

leverage to pressure him.

Finally, Israeli officials close to Netanyahu have reportedly said that after phase one of a ceasefire, Israel would resume fighting in Gaza—so phase one would not be a prelude to a full withdrawal. Sinwar famously follows Israeli media, and he is likely to believe that Netanyahu sees the continuation of the war as critical for the survival of the current coalition and that the Israeli premier therefore has no intention to fulfill more than the first phase of hostage release.

Moreover, some note that the paradigm of a phased ceasefire has been challenged in no small measure by one of the mediators: Cairo. In mid-August, Secretary of State Antony [Blinken came to the Mideast \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-egypt-seeking-progress-towards-ceasefire-gaza-deal-2024-08-20/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-egypt-seeking-progress-towards-ceasefire-gaza-deal-2024-08-20/) to promote a US "[bridging proposal \(https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-28/\)](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-28/)" that would enable Israel to thin out its forces along the southern Gaza corridor adjacent to the Egyptian border known as the Philadelphi Corridor as part of a first phase of the deal.

That was an effort by Blinken to square a circle. While other ideas have been put forward by all three mediators, the US knew it was alone on this proposal. Blinken was aware of Netanyahu's opposition to leaving the corridor, though he also knew, at the same time, that Israel was under no obligation to withdraw completely from Gaza, as part of the first phase of a deal. It would be sufficient to redeploy away from those parts of the corridor near densely populated areas. Yet, Egypt would not hear of it, unhappy with any arrangement that positioned Israeli forces near the Egyptian border, and fearing that those temporary measures might become permanent. Egypt did not join the US bridging proposal—and it did not take a lot to persuade Hamas not to accept the proposal either.

The question now is to determine possible next steps. Sources close to the hostage talks are wondering if the only way to revive them is to scrap the "phases" paradigm and go for a one-shot deal: releasing all the hostages in exchange for all of the Palestinian prisoners who would be released in phases one and two. This is sometimes called an "all for all" approach.

Those favoring the "all for all" deal argue that it is the only way to get all the hostages out, not just a subset of them. However, it would front-load the release of the Palestinian prisoners, and, most importantly, it would force Israel to pull out of Gaza sooner rather than later.

The Israeli interpretation of a one-shot deal differs significantly from this. Gal Hirsh, a former military official appointed by Netanyahu (but not formally) as part of the IDF hostage team, cited Netanyahu as favoring one phase if Sinwar, not Israel, [would be the one forced out of Gaza \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/10/middleeast/yahya-sinwar-safe-passage-israel-intl-latam/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/10/middleeast/yahya-sinwar-safe-passage-israel-intl-latam/index.html). Yet, that would not be accepted, as the mediators see the ultimate goal of the deal as Israel leaving Gaza.

This does not scare MK Gadi Eisenkot, formerly a member of the war cabinet and a former IDF chief of staff. He has said [publicly \(https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-817591\)](https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-817591) that a pullout from Gaza should not be frightening, as Israel possesses military strength and it could always return to Gaza in short-order and hostage lives would be saved in the meantime. That said, officials close to Netanyahu insist that Israel would need to commit to the international community that it is not returning to Gaza, which would complicate any prospect of going back.

So is "all for all" likely? For those who think Sinwar is happy with a long-time war of attrition, with his personal human shields and belief that Lebanon heralds a metastasizing regional war to his own benefit, the answer is obviously no. But Sinwar may not be the only one opposed to this approach. The one-phase approach forces Israel to choose between the hostages and staying in Gaza—issues that Israel has not wanted to see as diametrically opposed. That is at the heart of the dilemma.

Netanyahu seems to have made his choice: he will not prioritize the hostages over leaving Gaza, as his interpretation

of the stakes for the latter are too high for Israeli security. His critics will say it is all about coalition survival, and that cannot be ruled out. Yet, politicians are often less cynical about themselves than others are about them.

Even if Netanyahu will not publicly articulate it, his view seems clear: the impasse goes on, and there is more time for Israel to hunt down Sinwar. This is consistent with the premier's worldview that pressure works for Israel if it can be sustained, a point disputed by the hostage families, six of which saw their loved one executed last month, when it became clear that the IDF was not far away.

The phased negotiating paradigm meant the hostage families and Netanyahu were not necessarily on a collision course because Israel could defer, rather than concede, its objective. Now, however, they are in a zero-sum situation under "all for all," as it forces a choice of obtaining all hostages versus leaving Gaza. Anybody who has followed Netanyahu for a long time knows that he often likes to avoid hard decisions and instead hopes that time is on his side, even when he knows that time is the one thing the hostages do not have.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations, and creator of its long-running podcast [Decision Points](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/decision-points-podcast) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/decision-points-podcast>). This article was originally published on the Times of Israel website (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/reminder-the-hostages-or-why-an-all-for-all-deal-doesnt-help-them/>). ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Israel and Hezbollah Are Escalating Toward Catastrophe](#)

Sep 23, 2024

◆
Dana Stroul

[\(/policy-analysis/israel-and-hezbollah-are-escalating-toward-catastrophe\)](#)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Will Hezbollah Choose to Keep Its Word—or Its Arsenal?](#)

Sep 23, 2024

◆
Hanin Ghaddar

[\(/policy-analysis/will-hezbollah-choose-keep-its-word-or-its-arsenal\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Death of (Another) Hezbollah Lifer

Sep 23, 2024



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/death-another-hezbollah-lifer)

TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)