

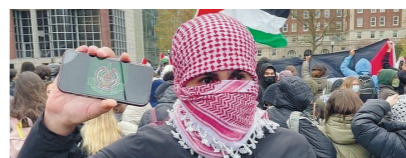
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HAARETZ

ENGLISH EDITION
 הָאָרֶז

Friday, April 26, 2024 | Nisan 18, 5784. Vol 105/31973

ISRAEL'S LEADING DAILY NEWSPAPER

www.haaretz.com

Hamas wants the army out of Gaza, while PM wants Rafah

International efforts to reach a hostage deal and an end to the war are intensifying

Amos Harel

The efforts to kickstart the negotiations toward a hostage deal with Hamas resumed this week, following a long period of stalemate. Let's hope it doesn't turn out that the contacts are again taking place in a format of "full speed in neutral," as the saying goes, which is what happened during the recent wasted months, since the completion of the first deal at the end of last November.

On Wednesday, Hamas posted a relatively rare video in which one of the 133 captives - 23-year-old Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who was abducted from the Nova rave - implores Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to agree to release the captives in a deal. It was a moving sign of life from the young man, who was known to have been seriously wounded, losing an arm, on October 7. This was not a random choice by Hamas. Goldberg-Polin is an American citizen, and the international campaign being waged by his family has drawn considerable media interest.

The journalist Barak Raviv reported on Thursday that Hamas was responding to pressure from Qatar, which itself acted at the demand of the White House. The United States was behind the publication of a public call to Hamas on Thursday on the part of 18 countries, from Europe, Asia and North and South America, to accept the mediators' proposal and



U.S. President Joe Biden holding former Israeli hostage Abigail Edan at the White House on Thursday.

President Biden's X account

release all the hostages immediately.

U.S. President Joe Biden continues to be personally active in the liberation efforts. This week he met with a former captive, 4-year-old

Abigail Edan, from Kibbutz Kfar Azza, an American citizen whose parents were murdered in the massacre. Netanyahu made do with a photo of him and his wife on seder night holding up a post-

er with the abductees' photos. A minor public furor erupted when it became known that the prime minister's wife had undergone an extensive Photoshop facelift in the version of the picture that appeared

in her social media accounts. The security cabinet and the defense establishment are now trying to draw up alternative proposals to get the negotiations moving again. One idea being mooted is to

skip the two-stage division and obtain the release of all the captives who belong to the humanitarian category (consist of the women,

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Biden, 17 other world leaders call on Hamas to release hostages

Ben Samuels

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Joe Biden released a statement alongside the leaders of 17 other countries - all with citizens held captive in Gaza - calling upon Hamas to release the hostages in order to bring an immediate and prolonged cease-fire.

"We call for the immediate release of all hostages held by Hamas, now for over 200 days. They include our citizens. The fate of the hostages and the civilian population in Gaza, who are protected under international law, is of international concern," the leaders said in the statement.

"We emphasize that the deal on the table to release the hostages would bring an immediate and prolonged cease-fire in Gaza that would facilitate a surge of additional necessary humanitarian assistance to be delivered throughout Gaza and lead to the credible end of hostilities," the leaders continue.

The leaders say "Gazans would be able to return to their homes and their lands with preparations beforehand to ensure shelter and humanitarian provisions," noting "we strongly support the ongoing mediation efforts in order to bring our people home. We reiterate our call on Hamas to release the hostages."

"Let us end this crisis so that collectively we can focus our efforts on bringing peace and stability to the region," they conclude. Beyond Biden, the leaders include heads of state from Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, France,

Germany, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Thailand and the U.K. The Hostages Families Forum welcomed the statement from the world leaders, and expressed their gratitude to them for "putting the issue of the hostages as a top international priority."

They called the statement a result of "diplomatic efforts carried out by the families of the hostages over recent months, alongside cooperation from decision-makers worldwide, aimed at bringing home all the hostages, the living for rehabilitation and the murdered for burial."

U.S. disturbed by Gaza reports

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A senior U.S. official noted the collection of leaders on the statement is "quite extraordinary," noting a previous similar effort failed given some disagreements. This statement, however, earned widespread support given the current situation on the ground and the fact that a deal remains on the table that would bring an immediate cease-fire with the release of women, wounded, elderly and sick hostages. "The key, really, is hostages," the senior official said, acknowledging the recent proof-of-life video of U.S. citizen Hersh Goldberg-Polin, which the Biden administration received 48 hours prior to its publication.

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An image of Hersh Goldberg-Polin in Re'im. Maya Allenczo/AP

IDF tells government it is prepared for Rafah op

Yaniv Kubovich and Amir Tibon

The army has informed the government that its forces have completed their preparations for an upcoming operation in Rafah, with the date for such an operation to be decided by the cabinet.

The army added that as part of preparations,

the 162nd Brigade, which has been positioned in the north and center of the Gaza Strip since the ground operation began, has moved closer to the southern city of Rafah. It will be replaced by two reservist units.

The military awaits the government's decision, and when it comes, it will begin evacuating Rafah. As of to-

day, about 150,000 Gazans have left Rafah toward Khan Yunis and Al-Mawasi. According to army estimates, the evacuation of the remaining population of Rafah - about 1 million people - will take weeks, and forces will enter the territory only after it is completed.

Senior officials said the war cabinet approved the

hostage-negotiations team to meet Friday with the Egyptian delegation that will be arriving in Israel, to jump-start negotiations that have been at a standstill over the past few weeks. Egypt is interested in promoting a deal, in part to prevent an Israeli operation in Rafah, which may cause the Gazan population to flee to Sinai.

A team headed by Mossad chief David Barnea and Maj. Gen. (res.) Nitzan Alon presented the cabinet with different plans for restarting negotiations.

A diplomatic source involved in the talks told Haaretz that one of the options under consideration is pushing for reaching an agreement which will include the release of all hos-

tages in one go in exchange for a mass release of Palestinian prisoners, instead of the gradual plans discussed so far.

An official said that this option may be under consideration, but it is still far from realization. According to him, a decision on the matter is expected to raise significant difficulties in the government.

High temperatures Thursday break Israel's records for April

Zafir Rinat

A heat wave that began Tuesday peaked Thursday, with temperatures breaking 85-year highs.

According to the Israel Meteorological Service, temperatures of 40.8 degrees Celsius (105.4 degrees Fahrenheit) were recorded in Tel Aviv Thursday, breaking a record for the hottest April day in Tel Aviv set in 1939, when temperatures reached 40.4 degrees Celsius.

Temperature records for April were also broken at locations including the Nitzan weather station, between Ashdod and Ashkelon (43 degrees Celsius); Kibbutz Kvutzat Yavne, just east of Ashdod (42.4 degrees) and in the Jordan Valley (44.8 degrees Celsius, 112.64 degrees Fahrenheit).

The heat wave broke on Thursday evening.

"Heat waves like this one and like those we've experienced over the past few years are a part of the trend of global warming," Amir Givati, executive director of the Israel Meteorological Service, says. The agency's annual report for 2023 noted that the year was the second or third hottest year since measurements began in 1950. The warming trend is characteristic of most of the years since the end of the last century, and it has intensified in the past 15 years. Most years since 2008 have been warmer than the average for the reference period (1991-2020). 2023 stands out as a particularly hot year - only 2010 was significantly hotter, and 2018 was very similar. These are similar to worldwide trends related to the climate crisis.



A beach in Tel Aviv, Thursday.

Tomer Appelbaum

Israel-Hamas war sparks growing polarization among U.S. Reform Jews

Judy Maltz

NEW YORK - Inspired by the Purim holiday tradition of gifting food packages to friends, neighbors and people in need, the clergy at Temple Rodef Shalom recently announced a new project they believed would speak to the times: donations to organizations that extend humanitarian aid to both Israel and Gaza.

The email inviting the Virginia congregation's 1,800 families to participate in the initiative listed a bunch of suggested charities in both places. "I felt it was a demonstration of our commitment to many things at the same time - the needs of displaced Israelis as well as the needs of innocent Palestinians," says Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, the spiritual leader of this large Reform



A "protest seder" in solidarity with Gaza in New York City on Tuesday.

Getty Images via AFP

congregation located outside Washington.

"We did have people who were grateful for the idea,

but we also had people who were offended by it," she relays. The latter included one congregation member

who left in protest.

It wouldn't be the first time since October 7 that Schwartzman's "commit-

ment to many things at the same time" has sparked polarization among her congregants. Her decision to include in the Shabbat service a prayer for the release of the Israeli hostages along with a prayer for the safety of innocent Palestinians did not go down well in certain quarters either.

"Some people wanted to know why we should be praying for the safety of Palestinians when the local Muslim community center we often work with was not reciting a prayer for the release of the hostage," recounts Schwartzman, who has served as senior rabbi of this congregation for 26 years. "I tried to explain that my ethics and morality are not based on someone else's actions."

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