



In negotiations, Netanyahu plays for time – and with hostages' fate

Amos Harel

The potential breakthrough in the hostage negotiations between Israel and Hamas was achieved, first and foremost, thanks to the pressure exerted by the United States on the other two mediators – Egypt and Qatar – and through them on Hamas' leadership.

Hamas' response last week to the latest Israeli-American proposal included, for the first time in a while, a certain softening of its demands. That explains the relative optimism among senior officials in the Israeli defense establishment about securing an agreement in the coming weeks.

It seems that any further progress depends in many ways on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's position. This is where any optimism among members of the defense establishment and politicians fades in the face of difficulties and remaining question marks.

Throughout the negotiations of the last six months, Netanyahu expressed contradictory, alternating messages, first promoting a deal and then rejecting it. This pattern has continued in recent days, as Netanyahu's political survival efforts stepped up and the fear of the collapse of his coalition by his cabinet partners from the extreme right has deepened – a scenario that may also affect the speeding up of the very slow schedule of his corruption trial.

The main thing that bothers the Americans concerning Netanyahu is his speech to Congress slated for July 24. The prime minister plans to visit Washington for a few



A demonstration in Tel Aviv calling on the government to agree to a deal to release the hostages held in the Gaza Strip, on Sunday.

Moti Milrod

days and also wishes to meet President Joe Biden, who has avoided meeting him for a long time, except for a short visit to Israel during the war's first week.

On the other hand, it could be that Biden's attention to the Middle East, and indeed that of the entire nation, may be relatively low considering the growing calls to replace Biden in the

presidential race due to his apparent mental and physical condition.

The hostage-deal negotiations, which are now expected to enter a critical phase and include even more meetings of the Israeli delegation abroad with representatives of the mediators, may also be affected by the internal developments in the Democratic Party. The degree of

pressure the Americans will exert in the hostage-deal talks is probably also related to the political situation in the United States.

In any case, it's doubtful whether Netanyahu will explicitly reject Hamas' proposal before his address to Congress. However, sources in the defense establishment believe that he may derail the talks afterward, as he

has done several times in recent months in response to proposals.

Questions concerning the reasons for the apparent softening of Hamas' position are still unanswered. The IDF hastened to attribute it to the military pressure exerted on the group in the army's operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah and Gaza City's Shujaiyeh

neighborhood.

It's possible, however, that the true explanation is slightly different and relates to several other reasons, including the attrition and exhaustion among the Palestinians and Hamas units after nine months of war that caused huge damage and destruction in the Strip.

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Thousands rally to demand Gaza hostage deal, early elections

Bar Peleg, Adi Hashmonai and Nir Hasson

Thousands of anti-government and pro-hostage-deal Israelis demonstrated and blocked roads across the country on Sunday as part of what activists declared a "day of resistance."

The protesters, which include relatives of hostages held in the Gaza Strip, demonstrated in front of lawmakers and cabinet ministers' houses and disrupted traffic as they marked nine months of the war in Gaza.

The protest began to peak toward Sunday evening. Over 1,000 protesters marched from Azrieli junction in Tel Aviv to the Histadrut labor federation's headquarters, where a rally was held under the theme "Stop Hiding." Demonstrations also took place in front of the Kirya defense complex in Tel Aviv, which houses the Defense

Ministry and the country's military headquarters.

Einav Zangauker, mother of hostage Matan Zangauker, climbed into a cage and bound herself during a demonstration on Begin Road in Tel Aviv, where thousands of people gathered to protest in support of a hostage deal.

Concurrently, hundreds of people protested in front of the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot and a major intersection in Haifa, which were blocked to traffic.

A protest march was also held in Jerusalem, where demonstrators walked from Sacher Park to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's private residence on Azza Street. Dozens of protesters demonstrated on the light-rail tracks on Jaffa Street in Jerusalem, blocking the train for a short time before police removed them by force.

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State opposes PM's request to postpone trial testimony to '25

Yael Freidson

The State Prosecutor's Office has stated its opposition to Benjamin Netanyahu's request to postpone his testimony in his corruption trial to March 2025, demanding that the prime minister's testimony begin by November 1.

In a filing Sunday to the Jerusalem District Court, the prosecution said the trial's defense phase should begin after the High Holy Days, that is after October 25 this year, emphasizing that four months was sufficient time to prepare.

The court will hold a

hearing on the request Tuesday, before rendering a decision.

Netanyahu's lawyers requested the postponement in June. The reasons cited including the exceptional demands on the prime minister's time as a result of the war in Gaza and the scope of the cases, in which he has been charged with fraud, bribery and breach of trust.

The prosecution noted that Netanyahu has argued in the past that he can stand trial while leading the country, whereas now he claims the opposite.

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State wants Haredim to do national service, but what about Arab citizens?

David B. Green

This year, Israel finally came to terms with the issue of universal service. Sort of. The High Court of Justice's June 25 ruling makes it far harder for the government to continue to avoid dealing seriously with the question of the Haredi draft exemption – though it can certainly be expected to try.

But have you noticed that the "all" in discussions of the concept of "service for all" rarely includes the more than 20 percent of Israel's citizens who are Arab? Perhaps it's understandable that neither Arabs nor Jews are pressing for the former to be drafted into military service (their exemption is even enshrined in the country's military service law), so long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains so far

from resolution. But what about some sort of civilian service, whether voluntary or mandated? Has that ever been on the table?

In fact, a dozen years ago – as the most prominent example – a committee led by then-Knesset Member Yohanan Plesner, of the now-defunct Kadima party, held extensive hearings on the topic and came up with a detailed proposed frame-

work for universal service.

Perhaps not surprisingly, its efforts went down the drain when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called an early election in October 2012 and the Knesset was dissolved.

Today, Plesner is president of the Israel Democracy Institute, which is busy combating – by means of position papers and briefings – the countless more urgent

threats faced by the country's democratic institutions and traditions. When I called him to ask what he thought happened to the idea of public service by Arabs, he seemed a little surprised, as if it was a subject he hadn't considered in some time.

Plesner spent most of our brief conversation explaining the practical obstacles that would stand in the way of implementing such a plan. The main problem? Not enough jobs.

According to Plesner, if all the eligible 18- and 19-year-old Arab Israelis were to accept a two-year assignment working in a hospital, school or some other worthy institution, 50,000 workplaces would be required each year.

As of 2022, some 19,000 young people were registered with the Authority for National-Civic Service. Of those, 5,000 are Arabs,



President Herzog with Israeli Arab women.

Haim Zach/GPO

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National Labor Court rules man in same-sex partnership legally qualifies as homemaker

Chen Maanit

The National Labor Court has ruled that a man who lives with another man in a family unit and is not employed can be legally considered a homemaker, according to the National Insurance Law, giving men the same rights to which a woman homemaker is entitled.

According to the court's ruling last week, distinguishing between men and women in the matter con-

stitutes discrimination. It ordered the National Insurance Institute to treat the couple the same as any other household.

The panel of judges headed by President Varda Wirth Livne wrote that the linguistic distinction between a man and a woman that exists in the current wording of the National Insurance Law – which uses the word "housewife" – is based on an archaic worldview that is not appropriate for today.

The judges noted that in

the 1950s, when the law was written, the Knesset did not consider the possibility of different family units like gay couples.

The court said choosing a legal interpretation applying the law to a family unit made up of two men is necessary under the principle of equality. "A distinction between a family unit consisting of a heterosexual couple and another that consists of a same-sex couple does not arise from a relevant difference and is therefore discrimina-

tory," the ruling said.

The judges added that "the interpretation according to which a man living in a relationship with a member of the same sex in a family unit can, according to his choice, be defined as a homemaker is necessary given the public interest and the principle of equality...This is an interpretation that upholds human rights, and for this reason, it is preferable to another interpretation."

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Israeli soldiers in Rafah last week.

Ohad Zwigenberg / Reuters

Army now controls 26% of the Gaza Strip

War has become a springboard for Jewish settlement in Gaza

Yarden Michaeli and Avi Scharf

The conquest of portions of the Gaza Strip and the holding of them for an unlimited period of time has been one of the most dramatic developments in the war that began in wake of Hamas' surprise October 7 assault. The Israel Defense Forces views the holding of this territory as a strategic move while the politicians are pushing to continue the war. Meanwhile, Hamas is demanding an end to the war and an Israeli withdrawal from the territories it has taken.

The army's activity in the seized territories is varied: It expands bases, builds infrastructure and paves roads while Hamas fighters take aim at its forces. According to Haaretz's calculations, based on satellite photographs and

other publicly available information, the IDF currently controls 26 percent of Gaza.

One senior officer says that when it comes to territory Israel has seized in the heart of Gaza, he sees "an effort for a prolonged occupation." The military activity is giving a tailwind to those who support renewing Israeli settlements in the Strip. Conditions are being created for the establishment of a new reality: a long-term Israeli presence in Gaza.

After nearly nine months of war, the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Gazans to the southern part of the Strip is becoming more permanent. The Israeli army has taken over the strategic areas from where they have fled, flattened them and created spaces that can be used for control of Gaza (see map). First, the

army established a buffer zone along the Israeli border, destroyed nearly all the buildings there and banned Palestinians from entering it. It also took control of the Philadelphi route along the Gaza-Sinai border to block Hamas' access to Egypt.

In addition, the army has seized control of the Netzarim Corridor, territory the size of Bat Yam, Bnei Brak, Ramat Gan and Harish combined (38 square kilometers, or 14.7 square miles). Palestinians are now prohibited from being there. The army has built at least four bases in the center of this corridor, and it has also paved Netzarim Road, which serves to bisect the Gaza Strip and control the movement of Palestinians – as well as a staging area for operations.

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