

# Gaza hostage talks hit roadblock, raising fears of prolonged captivity

U.S. officials are increasingly worried that the roadblocks they are encountering in the hostage talks will lead to Americans' prolonged captivity in Gaza.

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POLITICO

Talks to release the remaining hostages in Gaza have hit a stalemate in recent days, dashing hopes of U.S. officials that they might reach a deal by the end of the year, according to two senior U.S. officials.

More than 130 hostages are still being held inside Gaza. There are several factors complicating negotiations, the officials said.

Hamas's leaders, many of whom live in Doha, are increasingly unable to communicate with and control the actions of their fighters in Gaza. And recent allegations that Hamas has sexually abused the hostages has added to the tensions around the negotiations. In addition, the U.S. and Israel are still unable to locate all of the hostages and determine whether they are still alive, the officials said. All were granted anonymity to discuss ongoing, sensitive negotiations.

Combined, the obstacles have stalled the negotiations, meaning the release of the hostages will likely happen much more slowly than the U.S. originally anticipated.

The original hostage deal lasted eight days and led to the release of 110 hostages and 250 Palestinian prisoners. But U.S. and Israeli officials have said that [the deal broke down](#) when Hamas refused to provide a list of women and children that were set to be released.

Despite that setback, the Biden administration had hoped to reach another agreement for the release of the remaining hostages and another pause in fighting before Israel began its offensive in southern Gaza. Even if the fighting resumed, Washington hoped it could help broker a deal before Jan. 1, the officials said.

That is looking less and less likely. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters in a briefing Thursday that the administration is "not close to inking a deal" for a pause in fighting and release of hostages.

The officials stressed that conversations are still ongoing and that the situation could improve in the coming days, especially if Hamas agrees to release the female hostages.

Officials from the U.S. intelligence community, the White House and the State Department have spent the past week pushing for a new deal with leaders in Qatar, Egypt and Israel without making much headway.

CIA Director Bill Burns had traveled to Doha to meet with intelligence officials from Israel and Egypt as well as the Qatari prime minister. Secretary of State Antony Blinken also spoke with the prime minister.

The refusal to provide the list of women and children was the first roadblock, one of the officials said, leading to a breakdown in communications with Hamas.

Renewed fighting in southern Gaza and accusations by the U.S. and Israel that Hamas leaders are abusing the female hostages sexually are further straining talks, the officials said.

“It is a sick truth of this particular group that they use sexual violence as a weapon and a tool,” Kirby said in another briefing Wednesday. “Sadly, I think it’s safe to assume that they’re still using sexual violence as a weapon, but I can’t speak to specific cases.”

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller told reporters Monday that Hamas does not “want these women to be able to talk about what happened to them during their time in custody.”

The IDF appears to be distancing itself from such statements. “Following some comments aired in the last day on the topic of the hostages in Gaza, the discourse on the topic is irresponsible, inaccurate and it should be avoided,” the IDF said in a statement released Wednesday.

U.S. officials have said that they are still working on gathering additional information about the remaining hostages, including whether they need medical attention.

“The truth is we don’t know a lot,” Kirby said. “If we could get Red Cross access to them ... it would help give us some information.”

Meanwhile, Hamas leaders in Doha and the fighters in Gaza aren’t always in agreement about strategy.

“The Gaza military guys are calling their own shots,” a third senior administration official said. “They don’t always listen to the political leadership elsewhere.”

The Biden administration plans to continue talking with Israel, Qatar and Egypt, including at the Doha Forum next week. Roger Carstens, the administration’s hostage envoy, will be at the Doha gathering, but his trip had been planned before the Gaza war, a State Department spokesperson said, declining to offer further detail.

*Nahal Toosi and Alex Ward contributed to this report.*