



THE BLOGS

**Daniel Levin**

# President Biden Should Jettison Netanyahu and Focus on the American Hostages



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We are fast approaching the one-year anniversary of the horrific Hamas assault on October 7, 2023. Almost a full year of death, destruction, and displacement, of failed negotiations with meaningless utterances of “cautious optimism” about cease-fires and hostage releases. Meanwhile, Gaza and Gazans have been pulverized, residents of Israel’s South and North have had to leave their homes, and the hostages’ chance of survival shrivels by the day.

The bodies of six more hostages were just recovered, executed by gunshots to the head, including the body of California-born Hersh Goldberg-Polin, whose parents Rachel and Jon had spoken so touchingly at the Democratic National

Convention in Chicago. Demonstrations of rage at the callous indifference and cruel ineptitude of the Netanyahu government have erupted all over Israel.

Despite President Biden's palpable dislike for Prime Minister Netanyahu and his instructions to American negotiators to bypass Netanyahu and work directly with their Egyptian and Qatari counterparts, he understands full well that a truce in Gaza cannot be accomplished without the Israeli government. That does not mean, however, that the fate of Americans as well as that of the other foreign nationals or dual citizens should remain in the hands of Netanyahu and his far-right coalition partners.

Four American hostages are believed to still be alive, and Washington is also trying to secure the release of the remains of three American hostages who are presumed to be dead.

The primary obstacle preventing a hostage and cease-fire agreement is Netanyahu's refusal to give up control over two corridors in Gaza: The Philadelphi corridor along the Gaza-Egypt border, and the Netzarim corridor that Israel has set up to split Gaza into a Northern and a Southern part. While Israeli control over the Netzarim corridor has more to do with the aspirations of the Netanyahu government for Israeli control and even a reoccupation of Gaza, the Philadelphi corridor is intended to prevent the movement of goods and people between Gaza and Egypt – a measure that has proven to be ineffective, even before Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza.

American, Egyptian, and Qatari negotiators have presented viable alternatives to these corridors, which would take Israel's security interests into account. Control over the Rafah crossing on the border with Egypt is opposed not only by Hamas but also by Egypt, and was never deemed vital to Israel's security – something that key members of the Israeli negotiating team, headed by Mossad chief David Barnea, as well as senior military and intelligence officers have acknowledged repeatedly.

In his last phone call with President Biden and Vice President Harris, Netanyahu expressed flexibility regarding the Philadelphi corridor, only for an Israeli government official to “clarify” the next day that Netanyahu’s position on Israeli control over the Philadelphi corridor had not changed.

On the very same day that the six murdered hostages were laid to rest, Netanyahu held a press conference and proclaimed his intention to maintain control over the Philadelphi corridor. He might as well have decreed that no more hostages will be released alive. What Netanyahu lacks in commitment to the hostages and their families, he more than makes up for in his masterful manipulation skills.

Time and again, Netanyahu has refused to approve an agreement that his own negotiators have recommended. Netanyahu’s pattern of telling the Americans that he is “working tirelessly” towards a hostage deal, and then putting out statements that are the opposite of what the mediators agreed upon, has led members of his own negotiating team to tell devastated hostage families that their own prime minister is sabotaging the negotiations and that political considerations are preventing a deal to save their loved ones.

Perhaps Netanyahu is scared that Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel’s Minister of Public Security and arsonist-in-chief, will leave the coalition in the event of a truce, no matter how diluted or temporary, that is required for any large-scale hostage deal. This would cause the government to collapse and strip Netanyahu of the immunity he has been clutching to in order to avoid jail time as a result of his various corruption trials. Perhaps he and his coalition partners do not feel the same degree of urgency and solidarity towards the hostages and their families as might be expected, possibly because many of the hostages come from kibbutzim and areas that are not considered his core constituencies.

If Netanyahu does not prioritize the lives of Israeli hostages over his own political survival, he certainly does not care about Americans or any of the other

dual citizens and foreign nationals. When President Biden touched the hearts of Israelis on October 18, 2023 and expressed his and America's outrage, empathy, friendship, and unwavering commitment to Israel's security, Netanyahu rewarded him by undermining American mediation efforts and disparaging the Biden Administration at every opportunity, culminating in his shameful speech before the US Congress on July 24, 2024, reminiscent of the stunt he pulled in March 2015 to emasculate President Obama and his efforts to secure the nuclear accord with Iran.

The continued reliance on Netanyahu to agree to a deal that would secure the release of all the hostages is tantamount to an abandonment of these hostages. While the Biden Administration does not have a mandate to negotiate for the release of Israelis, it most certainly has a mandate, in fact a sacred obligation, to do everything it can to bring back its own citizens, alive, as do the other governments for their nationals still held captive in Gaza.

Hostage negotiations are messy, whether with terrorist groups or with hostile governments who have wrongfully detained American citizens. In most cases, the US has sanctioned these groups and lacks direct access to them. Third parties are required, not only to communicate and negotiate on behalf of the American government, but often also in order to make a deal possible. Someone else's chips may need to be cashed as part of a creative exchange of favors and counter-favors, similar to a [multiparty trade between sports teams](#). This process is excruciating, but it is the only way to succeed in the most adverse of circumstances.

It would have been easier to negotiate the release of the hostages as part of a cease-fire and large-scale exchange for Palestinians imprisoned in Israeli jails. But since Netanyahu continues to undermine even his own negotiators by moving the goal posts and adding conditions he knows Hamas will never accept, the time has come to act forcefully on behalf of the American hostages and other foreign nationals, even without a truce.

Biden’s pleas to Netanyahu and Secretary of State Blinken’s continued trips to Israel evoke Einstein’s definition of insanity. After all, if Netanyahu is no longer trusted by a majority of Israelis to put the hostages’ lives above his own personal interests, why should Americans trust him?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Daniel Levin is a member of the Board of the Liechtenstein Foundation for State Governance, which is engaged in 'Track 3' mediation initiatives and hostage negotiations in the Middle East. His recent book is 'Proof of Life: Twenty Days on the Hunt for a Missing Person in the Middle East.'

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