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Can Israeli Protests Push a Gaza Deal Over the Line?

Unit for Political Studies

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The killing in Gaza of six prisoners held by Hamas, as Israeli forces tried to reach them in a tunnel in Rafah, triggered a massive wave of protests in Israel demanding that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reach a ceasefire agreement to bring back the other detainees in Gaza alive.

These protests are the largest Israel had seen since the outbreak of war with Gaza on 7 October 2023. They gained further momentum when Israel's largest trade union, the Histadrut,¹ called for a general strike on 2 September,² briefly disrupting swathes of the Israeli economy.³ This was the biggest major protest in Israel since Spring 2023, when mass demonstrations against Netanyahu's plans to neuter the judiciary forced him to shelve the legislation and back down from his decision to dismiss Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, who had opposed the reforms.⁴

The Scope and Impact of the Protests

Since the last prisoner swap between Israel and Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip in November 2023, following a week-long ceasefire, diplomatic efforts and pressure from both inside and outside Israel have all failed to persuade Netanyahu to sign an agreement to exchange the remaining hostages in the Gaza Strip for Palestinian prisoners and bring about a more permanent truce.

Netanyahu has stuck to his guns, insisting that Hamas must be eliminated, and Israel's military campaign must resume after any prisoner swap agreement. He has repeatedly set new conditions every time a deal appears close. Most recently, he has insisted that the Israeli army must remain in control of the Philadelphi Corridor (known in Arabic as the Salah al-Din Axis), a narrow strip of land between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

The protest movement demanding an agreement, led by the families of Israelis detained in Gaza, has remained limited in scope, for months proving unable to mobilise enough popular support to influence Netanyahu's position. The Prime Minister has drawn support from the Israeli public's desire for revenge against Hamas, as well as the far-right coalition in the Knesset (Israel's parliament) which demands that the war continue until its goals are achieved – unclear as those goals may be. Netanyahu has also relied on his relationships in Washington, impeding the Biden administration's ability to put pressure on him. This was clearly demonstrated during Netanyahu's 24 July speech to the US Congress, where the audience applauded no fewer than 79 times in 52 minutes.

However, in recent weeks the situation has begun to shift. Israeli society is showing signs of exhaustion from more than ten months of war. Many Israelis realise that the war is increasingly futile and hostage to the Netanyahu's personal political calculations as he seeks to hold his government together, even at the cost of the lives of the detainees held in Gaza.

1 A Zionist labor organization that was founded in 1920 and held its first conference in Haifa in December of the same year. See: "Encyclopedia of Terminology: Histadrut," *The Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies (Madar)*, accessed on 9/5/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/100j9b>.

2 Sam Sokol, "Histadrut Labor Union Announces Nationwide Strike, over Failure to Release Hostages," *The Times of Israel*, 1/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/8w5bo>.

3 Julian Borger & Quique Kierszenbaum, "Protests in Israel and Strike Called Amid Eruption of Outrage over Gaza War," *The Guardian*, 1/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/pgtrh>

4 "What is Happening in Israel? Judicial Overhaul Protests Explained," *Reuters*, 27/3/2023, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/1pmbrr>.



Therefore, when the Israeli army announced the discovery of the bodies of six detainees – five Israelis and one American – on 1 September, tens of thousands of Israelis thronged the streets of Tel Aviv, for the first time since the beginning of the war, to call for it to end.⁵ Thousands more joined the families of the detainees in a sit-in outside Netanyahu’s office in Jerusalem, during a cabinet meeting, to protest against his insistence on holding onto the Philadelphi Corridor, which has now become the main obstacle to reaching a ceasefire and a prisoner swap deal.⁶

The protests drew momentum from the involvement of the Histadrut, which called for a general strike on 2 September to put pressure on the Netanyahu government to return the Gaza detainees. The strike drew significant support from various sectors, including transport, education, and municipal council employees, in the largest anti-government protest since 7 October.⁷ Yet it was only a partial success, illustrating the widening divide within Israeli society, between those who want the war in Gaza to continue until Palestinian militant groups are eliminated and those who want to prioritise returning the hostages alive.⁸ The strike was widely supported in major cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa, where many businesses closed and services were disrupted,⁹ but more right-wing and conservative areas such as West Jerusalem and settlements in the West Bank were more reluctant to participate.¹⁰ Although the government was able to shut down the strike with a court order in its favour,¹¹ arguing that it could destabilise the economy and Israel’s security situation, the scale of the protests clearly reflected that the consensus which had emerged in Israel around the war’s aims after the 7 October attacks was beginning to crack.

The Military Establishment and the Day After in Gaza

As Israeli public anger has mounted, the military establishment has also expressed more public opposition to Netanyahu’s course in the war in Gaza. During a meeting of Israel’s Security Cabinet on 30 August, Gallant, whose views broadly represent those of the military and security establishment, voted against keeping the army in the Philadelphi Corridor. He accused Netanyahu of imposing his will on the army,¹² and demanded that the Cabinet reverse its decision to keep the army in the axis

⁵ “Tens of Thousands Take Part in Anti-government Protests in Tel Aviv - In Pictures,” *The Guardian*, 2/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/t5e5w>.

⁶ Borger & Kierszenbaum.

⁷ Steve Hendrix & Shira Rubin, “Protests Continue in Israel as Netanyahu Faces Outcry over Hostage Strategy,” *The Washington Post*, 2/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/r5748>.

⁸ Steve Hendrix & Shira Rubin, “Israelis Stage Mass Protests, General Strike as Hostages Laid to Rest,” *The Spokesman Review*, 2/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/xb4pzp>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Neri Zilber, “General Strike Paralyzes much of Israel after Hostage Deaths Trigger Protests,” *Financial Times*, 2/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/qm8a>.

¹¹ The Labour Court in Tel Aviv ruled on 2 September that the strike, which had halted most economic activity in Israel, must end the same day. “Israeli Labor Court Orders End to Strike Pushing for Gaza Hostage Deal,” *Le Monde*, 2/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/bsaik9>.

¹² Jacob Magid, “Netanyahu Tells Ministers he Prioritizes Philadelphi over Hostages, Horrifying Gallant,” *The Times of Israel*, 30/8/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/3sela1>.



in order to reach an agreement to guarantee the release of the remaining hostages in Gaza.¹³ The question of the Philadelphi Corridor has deepened an already bitter rift between Netanyahu and the army, whose top brass suspect Netanyahu is preparing for direct Israeli military rule in Gaza, notably with the creation of a new position, “Head of the Humanitarian-Civilian Effort in Gaza” and his appointment of Lt. Col. Elad Goren to fill it. Top officers fear that Netanyahu is dragging the military into the management of civilian affairs in the Gaza Strip, which could cost more than \$10 billion a year, out of the military’s budget, and would require several divisions to remain inside Gaza on a semi-permanent basis. This would essentially mean that the army’s fears, expressed by Gallant in a press conference on 15 May where he demanded that Netanyahu publicly declare that Israel would not establish military governance in the Gaza Strip, had come to fruition.¹⁴

In May 2024, Israeli media published a leaked document prepared by the military establishment examining alternatives to Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip. The document stressed that imposing military rule on the Gaza Strip was Israel’s worst available option, as it would drain the army’s resources, force Israel to extend the service period of reservists, and deploy a large military force to the territory, thus undermining its readiness along other fronts.¹⁵

Netanyahu’s insistence on staying in the Philadelphi Corridor also creates another point of contention with the army, which believes that the question must not be an obstacle to an agreement that would return the detainees alive – especially as the army bears the burden of their deaths in the Gaza Strip, given the ongoing war and its attempts to reach and free them. Two former war cabinet members and Chiefs of Staff, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, spoke for the military establishment during a joint press conference after the killing of the six detainees, at which they called for the return of the hostages, even at a high price, and argued that “the Philadelphia corridor does not represent an existential threat to the State of Israel” despite Netanyahu’s claims to that effect.¹⁶

Why is Netanyahu Clinging to the Philadelphi Corridor?

In parallel with pressure both from the street and the military and security establishment, the administration of US President Joe Biden has stepped up calls on Netanyahu to show flexibility over the Philadelphi Corridor. After receiving the news that an American detainee (Hersh Goldberg-Polin) had been killed in Gaza, President Biden accused Netanyahu of “not doing enough” to reach an

¹³ “Gallant Said to Call Philadelphi Demand a ‘Disgrace,’ Drawing Fury from PM, Ministers,” *The Times of Israel*, 2/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/gm9tg>.

¹⁴ Bar Peleg and Jonathan Lis, “Gallant: ‘I Will Not Agree to a Military Government in the Strip,’ Calls on Netanyahu to Declare that this will not happen,” *Haaretz*, 15/5/2024, accessed 5/9/2024 (in Hebrew) at: <https://bit.ly/3TiEula>.

¹⁵ Itamar Eichner, “Five Divisions Stationed in Gaza, at a Cost of 20 bln Shekels a Year: The Price of Military Rule the Day After,” *Ynet*, 17/5/2024, accessed 5/9/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://bit.ly/4e99eDA>.

¹⁶ Lazar Berman, “Rebutting Netanyahu, Gantz Says Israel’s Priority must be Hostages, not Philadelphi,” *The Times of Israel*, 4/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ucqf7>.



agreement to free the hostages.¹⁷ US media outlets have reported that the Biden administration is working on a final proposal to bridge the remaining differences between Israel and Hamas over the axis, to be presented in the formula of “take it or leave it”—meaning that if either belligerent rejects the proposal, Washington may abandon its efforts to mediate a hostage swap deal.

The truth is that the Biden administration has exerted next to no pressure on Israel to date. Even reports of a new proposal, after Israel rejected the administration’s first proposal, amounts to the US bowing to Israeli pressure, rather than the other way around. This casts doubt over the Biden administration’s efforts to give an illusion of hope, negotiations and progress ahead of presidential election in November, as it does not have the will to apply any real pressure on the Israeli government.

Netanyahu, for his part, has yet to change his position in any significant way. In a press conference hours after the start of vast protests against his approach to negotiations over the hostages in Gaza, he insisted that his position had still not changed. He described the Philadelphi Corridor as a Hamas lifeline, which must be cut, adding that an Israeli retreat from it would provide Hamas with a corridor for smuggling in weapons, and increase the threat Gaza poses to Israel.¹⁸

Although there are many contentious issues in the prisoner exchange negotiations, Netanyahu has turned the Israeli army’s presence on the Philadelphi corridor into the core point of contention in recent weeks. Many believe that the premier is exploiting the issue to buy time, in the hope of achieving some military gain that would strengthen his political position.¹⁹ He is also seeking to maintain his far-right governing coalition and perhaps also to influence the outcome of the upcoming US presidential elections, by thwarting Biden’s mediation efforts. Hamas, for its part, considers the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Salah al-Din axis as integral to any ceasefire agreement. Egypt also opposes an Israeli military presence there, arguing that it violates the 1978 Camp David Accords and the 2005 Rafah Crossing Agreement, and represents a threat to the stability of the region that threatens to draw Egypt into the conflict too.²⁰

Conclusion

Throughout more than 11 months of war, Netanyahu has been able to withstand all the international political, legal and public pressure he has faced to accept a deal to end the war in Gaza and return the hostages. He has also managed to contain and weaken domestic pressures from his political opponents and the families of the detainees, building on broad public consensus over the war and its goals, both in Israeli society and a majority of the Knesset, composed of his far-right allies. However,

¹⁷ Jeff Mason & Matt Spetalnick, “Biden Says Netanyahu not doing enough to Secure Hostage Deal,” *Reuters*, 3/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/2uhtyw>.

¹⁸ James Mackenzie, “Israel’s Netanyahu and Gallant, Locked Together in a Divided Government,” *Reuters*, 3/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/clvte>.

¹⁹ Ishaan Tharoor, “Netanyahu still Wants more War,” *The Washington Post*, 4/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/klfoi>.

²⁰ Tovah Lazaroff, “Gaza Hostage Deal Includes IDF Withdrawal from Sections of Philadelphi - WH Says,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 3/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/f4o99x>.



major protests and a general strike following the killing of the six detainees indicate that the Israeli consensus on the war is beginning to fracture. This may represent the biggest domestic challenge Netanyahu has faced since October 2023, and it reinforces pre-existing divisions in Israeli society, even if the protest movement remains largely limited to liberal and secular Israelis.

Stopping the war would require a wider portion of Israeli society to be involved in the movement, as well as greater pressure both internationally and from Palestinian armed groups. All these appear to be preconditions for a clear shift in the approach of Netanyahu, who is still focused on appeasing his coalition in order to stay in power for as long as possible.²¹

²¹ Tia Goldenberg, "Could Mass Protests in Israel over the Hostages Persuade Netanyahu to Agree to a Cease-fire Deal?" *The Washington Post*, 3/9/2024, accessed on 5/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/szstj>.