



SHUSHAN STREET: PRESIDENT BIDEN MUST USE LEVERAGE TO ACHIEVE A CEASEFIRE AND SAVE THE HOSTAGES

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President Joe Biden has secured a place in American history. He rescued the US economy from the Covid pandemic, rallied global support for Ukraine, and pursued the most aggressive climate agenda in US history. He will be remembered for voluntarily ceding power – putting his country above himself by withdrawing from the 2024 presidential race and endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris. Yet, President Biden’s work is unfinished. He must achieve a key set of priorities he [specified](#) for his remaining time in office: “to end the war in Gaza, to bring home all the hostages, and to bring peace and security to the Middle East.”

Hamas’ recent horrific [execution](#) of six Israeli hostages – including Hersh Goldberg-Polin, an American citizen – underscored the urgency of Biden’s mission. As Hersh’s father Jon said in [eulogizing](#) his son, he and Hersh’s mother Rachel left [no stone](#) unturned in attempting to save Hersh. Speaking to his son, he said, “Maybe, just maybe, your death is the stone, the fuel, that will bring home the remaining 101 hostages.” The hostage families [maintain](#) that a negotiated ceasefire and hostage-release deal is the one way to bring their loved ones back alive, and some [have lambasted](#) their government for “refus[ing] to seal a deal.”

After the hostages’ bodies were found, President Biden stated, “It’s time this war ended... It’s time to finish it.” Following months of trying to bridge the gaps between Israel and Hamas, the US, Qatar, and Egypt may [put forward](#) a “take it or leave it” deal. If the two sides fail to accept the proposal, it may mark the end of US-led negotiations. Failure is simply not an option, so we must identify the obstacles to a deal and determine how to address them.

Identifying the Sticking Points

The Biden Administration has called Hamas “the biggest obstacle to getting a ceasefire deal.” The US must press Qatar, Egypt, and others with leverage over Hamas to compel the terror organization to accept the agreement. Hamas must remain incapacitated, has to be held accountable for its crimes, and cannot be allowed to return to operational control of Gaza. The announcement of [terrorism charges](#) by the Justice Department against senior Hamas leaders is a welcome and significant step.

Meanwhile, it is increasingly apparent that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not pursuing a deal in good faith. The Prime Minister’s extremist coalition partners upon whom he relies to stay in power – Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir – have called for terminating negotiations and [threatened](#) to topple the government if Netanyahu agrees to a long-term ceasefire. For Netanyahu, this risk is personal. He still faces numerous [corruption indictments](#) that will be harder to delay if he no longer holds the premiership.

Prioritizing his own interests over the hostages’ lives, Netanyahu has retreated from the plan that President Biden [announced](#) on May 31 as an “Israeli proposal,” which was [endorsed](#) in a UN Security Council resolution. The prime minister added new conditions, including an [insistence](#) that Israel maintain control of the Philadelphi Corridor – a parcel of land inside Gaza that separates

the Strip from Egypt. Hamas has [rejected](#) that demand and Egypt maintains it violates the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. The heads of Israel's security agencies [assess](#) that Israel can safely withdraw from the corridor.

Israelis have made clear that Netanyahu is prioritizing neither the hostages nor Israeli security:

- A source in Netanyahu's coalition [disclosed](#): "Benjamin Netanyahu decided some weeks ago that he does not want a deal and...did all he could to torpedo it... The media fell for this spin and is consumed all day long with the question of yes or no to the Philadelphi, when the real question is really the fate of the hostages versus the fate of the coalition."
- Netanyahu's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [stated](#): "The fact that we prioritize the Philadelphi Corridor at the cost of the lives of the hostages is a moral disgrace."
- Opposition leaders [Yair Lapid](#) and [Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot](#) have debunked Netanyahu's claims regarding Philadelphi.
- Yohanan Plesner of the Israel Democracy Institute [assessed](#): "A growing number of Israelis, perhaps a majority of Israelis, do not trust the way the prime minister is conducting and carrying out this war... specifically the attempt to bring back the hostages." Massive [protests](#) since the deaths of the six hostages reflect "distrust in the way the prime minister is leading the negotiation."

The Biden Administration is "[confident](#)" that the US can "fully account for Israel's security needs" without Philadelphi. A senior US official [commented](#), "Not getting into this deal is more of a threat to Israel's long-term security. And that includes the Philadelphi Corridor."

Sealing the Deal

To close the deal, President Biden must urgently use his power and leverage to stop Netanyahu's continued efforts to shift the goalposts. Netanyahu is trying to run out the clock until the US presidential election and Biden's leverage wanes as Election Day approaches. No doubt, Netanyahu hopes Trump will win and stop US pressure to end the war. Biden must make clear – initially privately, but publicly if necessary – that he will impose consequences if Netanyahu refuses a ceasefire deal. They should include:

- **Weapons transfers:** Biden should make clear that the US government will review pending arms shipments to Israel and determine specific offensive weapons to withhold. To this point, the Biden Administration has [withheld](#) 2,000-pound bombs over concern about the civilian harm they would inflict if Israel dropped them in the densely populated Gaza Strip. History is replete with [examples](#) of US presidents – including Ronald Reagan and other Republicans – who withheld certain weapons from Israel to impact its behavior.
- **Political blame:** Biden should pledge to hold accountable the party (or parties) who reject a ceasefire deal by publicly assigning blame, from which he has largely shielded Netanyahu. If Hamas blocks a deal, the President should make that clear. If Netanyahu continues to present obstacles that stymie an agreement, Biden must say so and note that the Prime Minister bears responsibility for the hostages' fate. As Secretary of State James Baker understood, the [power to blame](#) can be a significant source of leverage in international mediation. Baker coined the term 'dead cat diplomacy,' referring to "threats to lay a figurative dead cat at the doorstep of

a disputant to publicly signal its intransigence” as a means of leverage. He [used](#) this tactic successfully to secure Israeli and Arab participation in the 1991 Madrid peace conference.

- **US-Israel relations:** Biden should convey to Netanyahu that we are at an inflection point in US-Israel relations, to which Biden has been deeply committed for decades. Rejecting a ceasefire deal in favor of the illusory goal of “total victory” and his own political survival would have a lasting, negative impact. Biden should note that this will likely include changes to the scope of future US assistance to Israel and the protection the US will extend to Israel in international fora, including the UN Security Council.

What is at stake?

The lives of the remaining hostages who have managed to survive nearly a year of captivity in Gaza hang in the balance. So too does the future for Palestinian civilians in Gaza – where infectious disease is spreading and global health authorities are raising the alarm about a potential [polio outbreak](#), while experts report that [famine](#) has spread throughout the Strip. Meanwhile, Israeli airstrikes continue to cause [massive casualties](#) and add to the over 40,000 [estimated](#) Palestinian deaths, the [majority](#) of whom are women and children.

Moreover, the threat of further serious regional escalation persists, with the risk of the US and our military personnel being drawn deeper into regional turmoil. Israeli and other regional experts have [made clear](#) that achieving a negotiated ceasefire in Gaza is [key](#) to calming tensions and averting a disastrous war that could engulf the Middle East and have repercussions beyond it. Thus far, the Biden Administration has skillfully employed deterrence, [regional security coordination](#), intelligence sharing, and diplomacy to [protect](#) Israel from a major Iranian attack and prevent further, potentially devastating reprisal strikes launched by Iran and Hezbollah, following [assassinations](#) presumed to have been conducted by Israel. This has included positioning two [US carrier strike groups](#) and additional assets in the region.

Ultimately, however, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has [indicated](#) that a Gaza ceasefire deal is needed in order to stave off a regional war. Danny Citrinowicz, the former head of the Iran branch in the Research and Analysis division of the Israel Defense Intelligence, also [assesses](#) that a ceasefire in Gaza is “key” to a ceasefire on Israel’s northern border and to thwarting further [attacks](#) by the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen.

As he seeks to free the hostages and end the devastating war in Gaza, President Biden’s legacy hangs in the balance. Securing a ceasefire would give the Harris-Walz campaign the chance to move past a divisive issue and consolidate the Democratic base. Failing to do so would mean passing a festering, dangerous conflict to President Kamala Harris, should she prevail in the November election. If Donald Trump is victorious, the impact of failing to resolve this conflict could be even worse.

Without a doubt, pressuring Hamas is warranted and necessary – but it is not sufficient. It is time for Biden to also bring US leverage to bear on an intransigent Prime Minister Netanyahu.