

Short-Lived U.S.- Hamas Talks Are a Cautionary Tale for Washington and Jerusalem

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Brief Analysis

To maintain pressure on Hamas and preserve U.S. deterrence at a sensitive point in Gaza discussions, the Trump administration needs to lock in its diplomatic coordination and public messaging with Israel.

On March 4, U.S. envoy Adam Boehler held [direct talks \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-confidant-lashed-out-at-us-envoy-over-direct-talks-with-hamas-official/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-confidant-lashed-out-at-us-envoy-over-direct-talks-with-hamas-official/) with Hamas chief negotiator Khalil al-Hayya in Doha, Qatar, following lower-level talks a week earlier. The negotiations [reportedly centered \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leiKyEgS26g\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leiKyEgS26g) on freeing American-Israeli hostage Edan Alexander and releasing the bodies of four other American-Israeli hostages. Although Boehler's subsequent media remarks focused on the humanitarian imperative of recovering the remaining hostages, he also [favorably mentioned \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-hostage-envoy-says-hamas-offered-to-disarm-during-years-long-truce/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-hostage-envoy-says-hamas-offered-to-disarm-during-years-long-truce/) an apparent Hamas proposal for a "five-year to ten-year truce," lending much greater diplomatic weight to the meetings.

Apparently stung by Israeli criticism of Boehler's remarks and the talks with Hayya, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [made clear \(https://www.reuters.com/world/us/rubio-says-us-hostage-envoys-direct-meeting-with-hamas-was-one-off-2025-03-10/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/rubio-says-us-hostage-envoys-direct-meeting-with-hamas-was-one-off-2025-03-10/) on March 10 that the United States will not engage in direct negotiations with Hamas again and will stick to the main diplomatic channel instead: "That was a one-off situation...As of now, it hasn't borne fruit. Doesn't mean he was wrong to try, but our primary vehicle for negotiations on this front will continue to be [Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff] and the work he's doing through Qatar." The same day, Witkoff [called \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/ahead-of-doha-talks-witkoff-says-deadlines-key-for-deal-on-ceasefires-next-phase/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ahead-of-doha-talks-witkoff-says-deadlines-key-for-deal-on-ceasefires-next-phase/) for imposing a deadline on Hamas to depart Gaza with its arms. He noted that once this happens, "all things are on the table"—implicitly including an Israeli withdrawal. Despite Washington's diplomatic clarifications, however, the episode merits closer scrutiny for what it reveals about gaps in U.S.-Israeli coordination on Gaza's

future.

Why the Talks Angered Israel

In Israel's view, direct talks like Boehler's risk creating the impression that Hamas can drive a wedge between Washington and Jerusalem, reinforcing the notion that the group gained leverage from attacking Israel and seizing hostages on October 7. Hamas might also use such talks to signal to Arab governments, other Palestinian factions, and the Palestinian public that it won't be leaving Gaza or the West Bank—a message that could further undermine the Palestinian Authority by suggesting that Hamas remains the stronger actor.

Israel was also troubled by the talks because it does not want hostage negotiations to be framed as a bilateral U.S.-Hamas issue. Hamas has repeatedly required the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails in exchange for freeing hostages, one of many reasons why Jerusalem has a very direct stake in any such talks. Moreover, negotiating separately for American hostages risks creating the perception that a U.S. passport is the only viable way for hostages to get out of Gaza, especially now that Israel is reportedly mulling (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-draws-up-new-war-plans-to-pressure-hamas-7ccfd0d5>) a resumption of large-scale military operations.

Lessons for U.S.-Israeli Coordination

Boehler's engagement suggests that the administration may be overlooking important aspects of Hamas's current situation (as the losing side in a long war) and past track record (as a serial truce breaker). Historically, Hamas has treated truce proposals—like the one Boehler mentioned—as opportunities for rearmament, breaking the agreements when it suited the group's interests. Now that Hamas is on the ropes in Gaza, it likely believes that some degree of U.S. recognition is paramount to its survival and will do and say almost anything to get it. Indeed, directly negotiating with the group could set a dangerous precedent by legitimizing its remaining leaders, undermining U.S.-Israeli leverage, and diminishing the PA as an administrative alternative for Gaza. In Boehler's case, what began as targeted humanitarian talks related to a single hostage suddenly (albeit briefly) became a high-level Israeli-Palestinian policy discussion (<https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/09/politics/video/sotu-hostage-envoy-adam-boehler-says-us-could-strike-deal-with-hamas-in-weeks>) that excluded one of the sides.

Limiting engagement with Hamas goes beyond preventing it from formally governing postwar Gaza. As Israel has correctly noted, the group could impose its will on the territory simply by maintaining armed cadres there, similar to what happened with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hence, legitimizing its presence in any way can be problematic.

This episode was also the closest that Washington and Jerusalem have come to being publicly at odds since the start of the Trump administration. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government has been largely delighted with President Trump's recent pronouncements on Israel-related issues and has been careful to avoid publicly airing any differences. Israel is generally assiduous about avoiding "daylight" between Washington and Jerusalem, believing that adversaries can only gain from such gaps. In response to Boehler's talks, Netanyahu's office issued a brief statement (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-holds-secret-talks-with-hamas-gaza-hostages-axios-reports-2025-03-05/>) signaling its opposition but in a very restrained manner, saving most of its ire for private channels. Secretary Rubio's subsequent remarks no doubt pleased the prime minister and vindicated his restraint.

More broadly, the episode indicates that the two governments are operating under different timelines. Boehler's direct talks with Hamas suggest that the Trump administration sees the hostages as living on borrowed time. Yet Netanyahu's recent actions may be driven by concerns about his domestic political future, which would be undermined by any suggestion that Israel is leaving Gaza. Notably, while senior U.S. envoy Witkoff will be going to Qatar soon for further talks on Gaza, Israel is not sending its most senior negotiators.

Even when they are on the same page against Hamas, the two allies need to carefully consider the types of public pressure they apply in Gaza. For example, Witkoff's public calls for exiling Hamas, coupled with Israel's high-profile decision to withhold aid deliveries, water, and electricity, may be intended to pressure Hamas into releasing hostages, among other objectives. Indeed, Israel gains when it can point to U.S. backing for its actions, and the recent decrease in White House criticism compared to the Biden administration gives Jerusalem greater freedom of action. On March 6, for example, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce **defended** (<https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-march-6-2025/>) Israel's decision to withhold humanitarian supplies, echoing the argument that aid distribution cannot take place in an "unsafe" environment. Valid or not, however, such arguments risk distracting from the ongoing multilateral discussions about next steps in Gaza, fueling tensions with governments who believe Israel and the United States are being insensitive to humanitarian concerns.

Implications for U.S. Deterrence

Of course, Boehler was hardly freelancing when he engaged Hamas—President Trump himself **publicly defended** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-defends-direct-us-hamas-talks-as-israel-seethes-attempts-to-sabotage-them/>) the talks, stating, "We're not doing anything in terms of Hamas. We're not giving cash. You have to negotiate. There's a difference between negotiating and paying. We want to get these people out." Yet the apparent contradictions in some of the administration's warnings and statements could wind up devaluing U.S. deterrence.

For example, after Trump talked about "cleaning out" Gaza and building **Riviera-like resorts** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/when-riviera-meets-sumud-why-palestinian-realities-dont-mesh-trumps-gaza-plan>) there, his aides walked back certain elements of his remarks, while Rubio stated that any relocation would be voluntary. The administration has since avoided revisiting the idea. Later, after three hostages emerged from Gaza looking emaciated, Trump **stated** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5ye69ey4pyo>) that he would support Israel resuming the war unless all hostages were released at once. Yet Israel was unwilling to jeopardize the possibility of securing more hostages through diplomacy and did not take Trump's advice. The president has issued ultimatums on other occasions as well—for months, he warned Hamas there would be "**hell to pay** (<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-threatens-hamas-hell-pay-release-hostages/story?id=119515983>)" if it does not release all the hostages, and he repeated the threat **on March 5** (<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114112015891353323>), declaring that this would be the "last warning." The very next day, however, he defended the decision to break the longstanding taboo against direct talks with Hamas.

Conclusion

This episode points to the importance of the United States and Israel being even more in sync on Gaza diplomacy whenever possible. Of course, differences cannot be entirely eliminated, since the two allies' interests are closely aligned but not identical. But if Witkoff believes that the Doha talks could be a vehicle for exiling Hamas and its weaponry, Jerusalem and Washington will need to coordinate closely on shared objectives, strategies, and tactics. This includes enforcing consistency in U.S. public messaging, so that Hamas does not believe Washington will eventually bend on letting it hold onto power (de facto or formal). Such issues are particularly sensitive now, when the chances of renewed warfare and the lives of the remaining hostages both hang in the balance.

More broadly, foreign adversaries are always looking to exploit gaps between the United States and Israel. The Trump administration and Netanyahu's government should therefore make sure that their warnings and actions do not create more such gaps, even rhetorically.

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