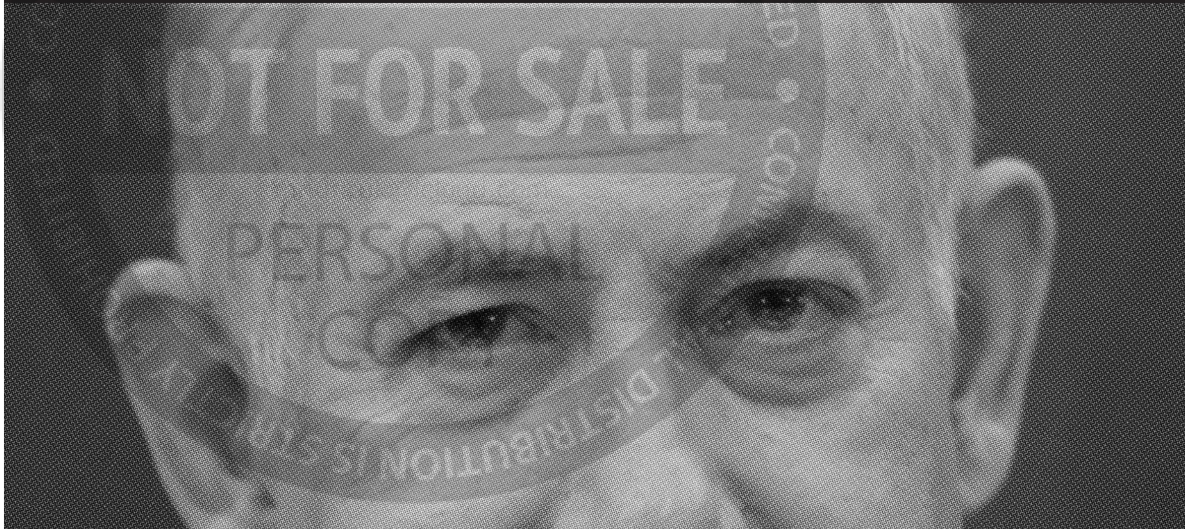


Netanyahu got an explicit warning about Oct. 7. He did nothing

In September '23, UAE President bin Zayed called PM Netanyahu with a harsh warning. The premier kept mum and didn't brief security officials. An extensive investigation, conducted for a new book, reveals his failures surrounding Oct. 7. Netanyahu: 'This is an absolute lie'



Abir Sultan/Pool via Reuters

**Shlomi Eldar
and Ruth Yuval**

These were the final days of September 2023. Terrorist attacks inflamed the West Bank, masses of Gazans regularly protested at the border fence, and the country was reeling from internal conflict over the judicial coup laws. Anyone watching the events with clear eyes could sense that an escalation was lurking around every corner.

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed – known as MBZ – was particularly concerned. “He spoke with me about this often in the months leading up to the war,” recounts President Isaac Herzog, who maintains friendly relations with bin Zayed. “He constantly conveyed messages that the situation needed to be defused. He even sent a special envoy to Israel who met with the prime minister. The emir seemed to sense that the area was on the verge of explosion.”

Bin Zayed would also speak directly with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. These conversations followed a standard procedure: A representative from the Emirati embassy would come to the Prime Minister's Bureau, bringing a special phone device that ensured the confidentiality of the call.

But this time, the call initiated by bin Zayed was unusual. A week and a half before October 7, 2023 the Emirati ruler called Netanyahu from the Presidential Palace in Abu Dhabi and spoke with him for 45 minutes.

In that conversation, bin Zayed warned that Hamas' leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, was planning a major operation against Israel. Bin Zayed expressed concern that the event in question would not only lead to bloodshed but also destabilize the entire region and undermine the Abraham Accords.

Three foreign senior sources are familiar with the contents of the con-

versation, the existence of which is revealed here for the first time. Its disclosure is the result of extensive research based on dozens of sources in Israel and worldwide, including very senior officials, as well as recordings, internal documents and correspondence. The research was conducted for the new book “Hostages: 843 Days of Abandonment” (Kinneret Zmora Publishing, in Hebrew) by the authors of this article. Also present during the call was a close adviser to bin Zayed, a Palestinian who had emigrated years ago from Gaza to Abu Dhabi and maintained strong ties in the Strip. According to the adviser, the Emirati ruler impressed upon Netanyahu the need to prepare for the threat.

In a 45-minute conversation, bin Zayed warned Netanyahu that Hamas was planning a major operation against Israel. To his surprise, the prime minister reacted calmly. Hamas intended to operate in the West Bank, he said, and Israel was prepared for any scenario.

with relative calm. Netanyahu said that, in his assessment, Hamas intended to operate in the West Bank area, and he reassured bin Zayed that Israel was prepared for any scenario.

The Emirati ruler would later recount the conversation he had with Netanyahu and the warning he also relayed to CIA Director William J. Burns. Bin Zayed shared with Burns the sense he tried to convey to Netanyahu that “something there is about to explode,” and told him that the Israeli prime minister believed the volatile area was, in fact, the West Bank.

“The emir hoped that despite his reserved response, Netanyahu would take the message seriously and take action,” the adviser says. None of them imagined that the prime minister would hear the message but wouldn't brief the heads of the defense establishment. The head of the Shin Bet security service, the head of the Mossad, the Israel Defense Forces chief of staff – none of them knew about bin Zayed's warning.

To understand where the unusual warning came from, and why specifically through the UAE president, one must go back to what transpired behind the scenes in the preceding months. In those months, with Netanyahu's knowledge and approval, Israel held talks with Hamas on a *hudna*, a temporary truce aimed at promoting a long-term arrangement in the Strip.

The contacts began secretly in early 2023, coinciding with the rise of Netanyahu's far-right government. Sinwar appointed Ghazi Hamad, a member of Hamas' political bureau, for the mission. Hamad is fluent in Hebrew and was involved in the secret contacts for the release of abducted IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. At the same time, a senior Fatah official, also fluent in Hebrew, was recruited. The official, who will be referred to here as “Coal Eyes” (a pseudonym, for reasons of caution), is known for his reputation as a reliable figure, acceptable to both Hamas and the Shin Bet. His role was to convey messages between the parties, so it would not appear as if there was direct contact between Hamas and Israel.

In practice, these conversations were virtually direct. Ghazi Hamad and Coal Eyes would sit at the Gaza home of Nasser Sarraj, who previously served as deputy director of the Palestinian Authority's Civil Affairs Ministry. On the Israeli side of the line was the Shin Bet official responsible for hostages and missing persons. Since unrest in Gaza could also harm Egypt, a large part of the discussions was based on agreements reached in advance between Jerusalem and Cairo. Nevertheless, “this entire direct channel was concealed from the Egyptians, for fear they would be offended by being excluded,” says one of the Shin Bet team members involved in preparing the talks, “and therefore it

became a personal channel cultivated by Netanyahu.”

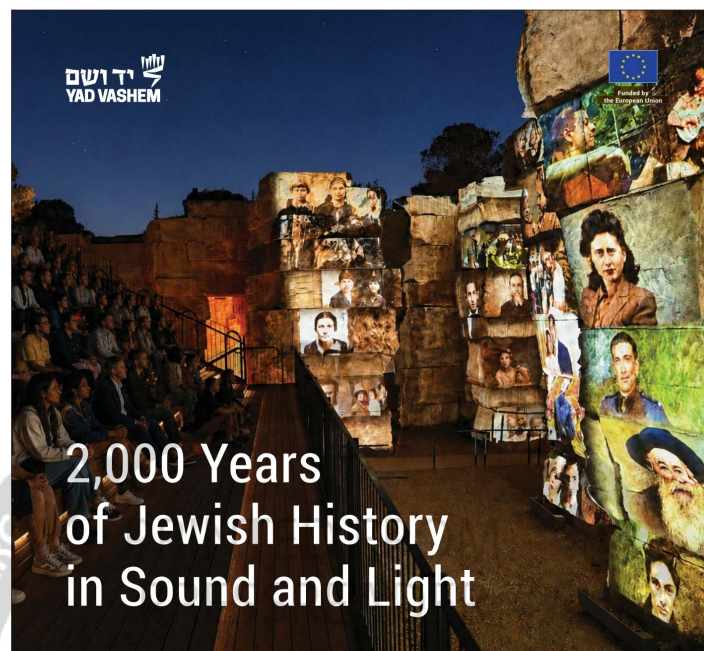
The talks initially focused on a gradual lifting of the blockade on Gaza and increasing the shipments of food and raw materials entering the Strip. A new idea was also raised: establishing trade zones along the Strip's borders with Israel and Egypt, which would offer thousands of jobs to unemployed Gazans. The Egyptians were also willing to allow “safe passage” for residents of the Strip on their way to the airport in Sharm el-Sheikh – which would provide them with an opening to the world. The proposal to supply natural gas to the Strip from the Gaza Marine natural gas field, discovered in 2000 off the enclave's coast, was also put forward. The proposal was called “G4G,” Gas for Gaza.

By summer 2023, it seemed that all economic matters had been resolved, and only the most sensitive issue remained on the agenda – the release of Israeli prisoners and the bodies of soldiers held in the Strip. In exchange for the return of Avera Mengistu and Hisham al-Sayed, and the bodies of Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, Sinwar demanded that 500 Hamas prisoners be freed. He later agreed to reduce the number to 250 prisoners, and after tough negotiations, consented to the release of only 50 prisoners. The Shin Bet was inclined to accept the release of 30 prisoners, including 20 serving life sentences, from a list deemed “palatable” for Israel, in exchange for the return of the four Israelis.

The atmosphere was so optimistic that an agreement with Israel was closer than ever and that both sides viewed the proposals as “feasible options.” One of the Hamas officials involved in the arrangement initiatives testifies that “it would come out enthusiastic every time and report to his colleagues, ‘It's happening.’”

An Israeli security source involved in preparing the talks confirms that “by the end of August 2023, Netanyahu approved the release of 30 prisoners, including 20 serving life sentences, to be chosen by the Shin Bet.” According to him, “all that was required at this stage was the approval of the ministerial committee for hostages and missing persons, whose consent is needed

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Mohamed bin Zayed Mandel Ngim/AFP



William J. Burns Al Drago/Pool/AFP

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for the release of prisoners, especially those serving life sentences."

However, Netanyahu repeatedly postponed convening the committee. Perhaps he did so out of fear of reaching an agreement with Hamas, or perhaps out of fear of the reaction from his extremist partners in his new government. To the Shin Bet representatives, who managed the channel with Hamas, he used to say he feared the story leaking to the media. "And so it got stuck week after week," the source describes.

When Sinwar began to show signs of displeasure with the lack of progress, Ghazi Hamad and Coal Eyes tried to reassure him that the reason for the delay was Netanyahu's preoccupation with the major turmoil then unfolding in Israel – the advancement of the judicial overhaul and the massive public protest that erupted in its wake.

Amid the ongoing internal upheaval in Israel, the perception grew within the Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah axis of resistance that Israel had become much more vulnerable, and that they could unite fronts and launch a coordinated campaign to defeat it. Internal documents show that senior Hamas officials at that time began to accelerate their appeals to Iran, requesting assistance in funding the attack.

Then, in early September 2023, Sinwar suddenly cut off all contact with the negotiating team. "He simply vanished from our radar, evaporated," says a senior Shin Bet official. A Hamas source explains that Sinwar lost patience with the Israelis' pace.

Thus, the direct channel established between a Shin Bet official and Hamas official Ghazi Hamad, which was managed under Netanyahu's approval, was severed. This channel, incidentally, would resume full activity a year after the October 7 massacre, in September 2024, when an urgent need emerged to extract the stalled hostage deal from the mire.

In September 2023, just before the die was cast, Sinwar arranged a private meeting with Fatah official Coal Eyes. "Tell the Israelis that if they don't make progress, I'm preparing a huge surprise for them," he declared emphatically. Here, he dropped a key word for the first time, one that should have triggered red flags: "Tell them to expect a zila, an earthquake."

Coal Eyes left the conversation shaken. He decided to consult a close friend, the same Palestinian who had emigrated from Gaza to Abu Dhabi and served as a close adviser to bin Zayed.

"Coal Eyes was agitated," the adviser recounts. "It was clear to him that the operation Sinwar was talking about could affect the entire Middle East, but he was afraid to report the information directly to the Shin Bet. On the other hand, he was even more afraid that if he didn't update the Shin Bet, the Israelis might accuse him of collaborating with Sinwar. He genuinely feared for his life. Therefore, he decided to convey the message to bin Zayed."

"What is the meaning of this?" bin Zayed asked the adviser, who conveyed Sinwar's warning.

"If he says zila, he means war," the adviser replied. "Are you sure?" the Emir asked.

"No, that's my interpretation," the adviser responded, "and that's also how Coal Eyes understood it."

The Emirati ruler thought it over, uncertain. He was troubled by the possibility that, amid the regional tensions, the mere warning about Hamas' intentions to start a war could ignite the flames, perhaps with a preemptive strike by Israel. He finally decided: "If we are not sure, we will not convey any warning to the Israelis for now. We will investigate the matter thoroughly until we are certain."

Sinwar took a deep breath, and in a chillingly quiet voice said: 'Convey a message that I am preparing the mother of all surprises. A terrifying operation. Something extraordinary. Please convey to the Israelis what I am saying word for word.'

To understand the seriousness of Sinwar's threat, Coal Eyes asked to hold another meeting with him in Gaza. The meeting took place in mid-September 2023.

"Well?" Sinwar asked. "Did you convey the message to the Israelis?"

"No," the mediator replied.

Sinwar took a deep breath, and in a chillingly quiet voice told him: "Convey a message to them that I am preparing the mother of all surprises. A terrifying operation. Something extraordinary." Again, he rolled the word zila, earthquake, on his tongue. "Please convey to the Israelis what I am saying word for word," he demanded.

Coal Eyes called bin Zayed's adviser from Gaza to relay Sinwar's words. "I asked him for all the details," the adviser recalls, "including Sinwar's body language, his precise tone of voice, and the context in which the words were spoken, especially regarding the zila warning. I suggested he leave the Gaza Strip quickly and meet me at my home for a private conversation. By the end of the meeting, I understood that neither Coal Eyes nor I had erred in understanding the message: Sinwar intended to go to war."

The adviser brought bin Zayed on his impression of the conversation with Coal Eyes. The Emirati ruler understood the magnitude of the threat and decided that "Sinwar's message must be conveyed to the Israelis, to the highest ranks there, as soon as possible."

Indeed, on September 15, Coal Eyes and the adviser conveyed the warning to the Shin Bet. The head of the Shin Bet, Ronen Bar, requested an immediate phone call with the prime minister, which was arranged by Netanyahu's military secretary, Avi Gil. During the call, Bar briefed Netanyahu about Sinwar's "earthquake" threats, and it was decided to hold a security meeting involving all relevant security agencies.

"Why did Sinwar send us a warning?" a senior intelligence official rhetorically asks now. "Either it was because he



Ghazi Hamad

Yahya Sinwar

Reuters

Mahmud Hamad/AFP



Gazans destroying the border fence and invading Israel on October 7. At 7 P.M., Qatari Prime Minister al-Thani called Barnea, saying, "Hamas is ready to release all civilians now, and we are prepared to mediate." "If they want to release the civilians," the Mossad chief replied, "let them release them. We are not prepared to speak with Hamas."

Hani Abuhar/Anadolu Agency via Reuters/Conne

grew tired of Israel's foot-dragging, wanting to pressure us into an arrangement and not so eager to start a war. Or, as we prefer to think, it was part of his 'Great Deception' plan, and he wanted to test the IDF's readiness."

Either way, the defense establishment took no unnecessary risks. The security meeting took place two days later, on September 17, with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Military Intelligence representatives participating. At the end of the discussion, it was decided to hold a working meeting at the Prime Minister's Bureau later that same day. Representatives from the Mossad and the National Security Council were also invited. Shin Bet representatives at the meeting estimated, based on cross-referencing with new intelligence materials, that Sinwar might be planning to get his hands on Elizabeth Tsurov, the Israeli researcher who was abducted and held in Iraq at the time, so he could raise the number of Palestinian prisoners he would receive in an exchange deal.

The head of the Shin Bet qualified that this was only an initial assessment, and that the warning should be taken seriously, as it indicated a lack of deterrence on Israel's part and that "we are on a collision course." Bar recommended an operational method of "a fire-extinguishing bomb" – a code name for a powerful and sudden attack designed to quickly neutralize a major threat – or at least implementing "strong defensive efforts" in Gaza and the West Bank, if only as preparation for the approaching Jewish holidays. No decisions were made at the end of the meeting.

Seeing that Israel was not responding to the clear warning conveyed to the Shin Bet, the Emirati ruler decided to hold a conversation with Israel's prime minister himself. Thus, that 45-minute conversation took place at the end of September, in which he conveyed an explicit warning to Netanyahu about Sinwar's intentions.

A similar call reached the Prime Minister's Bureau in those days from the Egyptian intelligence chief, Gen. Abbas Kamel, who warned Netanyahu of "something unusual, a terrifying operation," about to be launched by Hamas. Journalist Smadar Perry, who published the details of the conversation in the Yedioth Ahronoth daily, recounts that Netanyahu also told Kamel: "In Gaza, we are in the picture, we are in control. Our problem is with the West Bank, and that's where we are also diverting forces."

On October 1, in a discussion about the Gaza border riots and the identification of Hamas' intentions to carry out a terrorist attack in the West Bank, the head of the Shin Bet again recommended targeting senior Hamas officials, including Sinwar, who "was showing signs of arrogance."

As in previous instances when the proposal was brought before him, Netanyahu replied: "Prepare plans for me and I will consider them."

"He never said," explains a senior defense official. "That was always his way of postponing dealing with the problem."

Another senior official present at the discussion recalls that in summing up the meeting, the prime minister said: "Continue to work on the capability, but for now, calm the situation."

Throughout the entire meeting, the prime minister did not mention the warning calls he had received.

"If we had known about the warnings, there's a chance it would have given more weight to the first message we received from Sinwar," says a senior Shin Bet official. "Perhaps it would also have clarified what was behind his sudden withdrawal from the talks in early September. It's possible we would have put two and two together and reached a completely different conclusion from the one we did, one that would have changed our entire assessment picture."

The roots of the complex relationship between Netanyahu and Sinwar can be traced back many years, to Sinwar's release from an Israeli prison in the 2011 Shalit deal. After ruthlessly seizing all power centers in the Strip, Sinwar began to formulate a new, two-pronged strategy designed to extricate Gaza from its predicament.

"From an early stage, perhaps even in prison, Sinwar had two alternatives in mind," says a senior intelligence official who was closely familiar with Sinwar at the time. "On the one hand, he accelerated the development of Hamas' military capabilities, turning it into a powerful terrorist army that repeatedly clashed with Israel. On the other hand, he let the realization sink in that in all rounds of fighting in Gaza for his been decisively defeated. Therefore, despite all his hatred for Israel, a chance should be given to an attempt to reach an arrangement that would allow for normal life in Gaza, even before putting the Hamas army into action if the arrangement did not materialize."

In 2017, Sinwar decided to take a surprising step. He contacted his sworn rival, former Fatah official and current businessman, Mohammed Dahlan. The two peers from Khan Yunis knew each other from their university days in Gaza, and even then, intense animosity existed between them. The tension escalated when Dahlan, head of preventive security in the Palestinian Authority during its rule in the Gaza Strip,

waged an all-out war against Hamas leaders. When Hamas forcibly seized power in Gaza, Dahlan was placed at the top of the assassination list.

But now Sinwar believed he could use Dahlan and the connections he had established with both the Egyptian government and Israeli security services. In summer 2017, after almost 40 years of estrangement and animosity, Sinwar met with Dahlan at his home in Cairo, along with several other senior Hamas officials, including Mohammed Deif, head of the military wing, and Moussa Abu Marzouk, a member of Hamas' political bureau.

Sinwar described to Dahlan the severe suffering in Gaza and asked him to convey messages to Netanyahu about his desire for a satisfactory arrangement. Its core elements were easing the blockade and boosting the Gaza economy, primarily by creating jobs.

Dahlan brought the Egyptians into the picture to help mediate between Sinwar and Netanyahu. The initiative created a network of indirect working relations between Israel and Hamas. A glimpse of these contacts would be revealed retrospectively in 2022, when then-National Security Council head Meir Ben-Shabbat disclosed in an interview with Yedioth Ahronoth the negotiations conducted with Sinwar. Ben-Shabbat presented a note that Sinwar had written in Hebrew and sent to Netanyahu in 2018: "Calculated risk."

"That was one of the beautiful moments in the process," Ben-Shabbat said. "I understand from this that Sinwar is very attentive to what is happening on the Israeli side, analyzes every utterance from politicians, understands the dilemmas and introduces his own input into them."

In August 2018, the contacts matured into a meeting of senior Israeli officials on the matter, in the presence of the prime minister. During the meeting, a structured plan was presented for formulating a deal in which the four prisoners would be returned in exchange for a mutual cease-fire and an Israeli agreement to an arrangement and significant easing of the blockade on Gaza.

The next stage concerned the exchange deal itself. In exchange for Hamas releasing the four Israelis, Israel agreed to release Hamas prisoners, including those arrested in the 2014 Gaza war (Operation Protective Edge), with the exception of those involved in significant terrorist activity. The meeting's summary document stated that "postponing a captive and missing persons exchange deal, and separating it from the arrangement process, could lead to delaying the solution for the return of captives and missing persons for years to come."

Senior defense officials concluded that the conditions were the most conducive for Israel to reach a prisoner exchange deal at reasonable costs. Netanyahu summed up the discussion and committed to making a decision. However, time passed, and Netanyahu began to hesitate and delayed approving the arrangement.

On the other hand, when security agencies identified excessive operational activity by Hamas, Netanyahu repeatedly refused to authorize initiating a powerful operation against them. "It was already routine," a senior officer recounts. "They fire rockets, we respond, there's a round of fighting, residents of [Israel's] Gaza border area are exhausted, and it costs a lot of money. The army wanted to launch a broad and thorough military operation in Gaza several times, but the very government of the person who promised before his election to be strong against Hamas' insisted on not escalating and diligently preserving the 'asset' named Hamas. 'Calm down,' they would tell us. 'Let us focus on the north and Iran.'"

A former IDF major general testifies that he heard "more than once the chief of staff, Herzl Halevi, criticizing Netanyahu's containment policy." He would describe it in vivid terms in meetings: "It's like having a nail sticking out of the wall at home, and instead of pulling it out, you gather all the family members, including the children, and tell them: 'Every time you pass here, beware of the nail.' When we agreed to live with the nail, we didn't understand that what would happen in the end is that instead of removing it from the wall – we would be impaled on it."

Then the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, and contacts between Hamas and Israel were severed. Israel focused on addressing the new problems brought by the pandemic and, at the same time, was swept into five consecutive election rounds. Within the axis of resistance, a new strategic idea began to take hold: that the day was near when a decisive blow could be dealt to Israel in its weakness. Sinwar, for his part, continued to invest much effort and money in developing the tunnel project in Gaza and in training and arming the Hamas army for the day of reckoning.

Almost three more years would pass before the day of reckoning arrived. "When you read these words of ours, thousands of jihad fighters from the Iz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades will emerge to attack targets of the criminal Zionist occupation, and will bomb enemy outposts, its concentrations [towns] and junctions in the Gaza Strip and occupied Palestine," Sinwar and his associates Mohammed Deif and Marwan Issa announced in a letter they sent to Hezbollah on the morning of October 7, in an attempt to persuade the organization's leader

at the time, Hassan Nasrallah, to join the operation. "They will breach the separation fence to confront and fight against the occupation forces, and seize military and civilian positions in the area and capture many occupation soldiers."

At 6:29 A.M. on October 7, the "zila" arrived. By noon, social media in Israel and worldwide were already flooded with horrific footage of the massacre – live-streamed killings, arson and destruction. Dozens of videos showed civilians being abducted into the Gaza Strip.

When the Israeli security cabinet convened with some delay, at 2:45 P.M., there was still no clear idea of the number of people abducted. "Currently there are 14 soldiers and 28 civilian hostages, and dozens more with whom there has been no contact," the head of the Shin Bet said. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich demanded that the captives be ignored, stating that "it's impossible to operate with such a mindset."

"I instructed the IDF: No negotiations whatsoever," Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declared. "They will only talk to us when they are on the ground, with their heads underwater."

By evening, the world was flooded with horrifying information about the abduction of hundreds of men and women, children and elderly. At 7 P.M., Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani called Mossad Director David Barnea, with whom he had a friendly relationship. "Dedi Boy," the Qatari ruler used to affectionately call the Israeli intelligence official. The two had met just a week earlier, at the end of Yom Kippur. Barnea had traveled to Doha then on Netanyahu's behalf to ask the Qatari to increase financial aid to the Strip.

"Al-Thani was agitated. 'I just finished a conversation with Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh and his deputy Khalil al-Hayya, who had only recently arrived in Doha,' he briefed Barnea. 'I explicitly threatened them that if all civilian hostages are not released immediately, I will personally order their expulsion from Qatar. I would like to inform

The atmosphere was so optimistic that Fatah's Coal Eyes repeatedly reported that an agreement with Israel was closer than ever and both sides viewed the proposals as 'feasible options.' A Hamas official says he'd report to colleagues, 'It's happening.'



David Barnea

Ronen Bar

Chaim Goldberg/Flash90

Soyuz Diamant

you that Hamas is ready to release all civilians now, and we are prepared to mediate."

The Mossad director's response left al-Thani confused. "If they want to release the civilians, let them release them," Barnea replied. "We are not prepared to speak with Hamas." "These are not the Israelis I know," the Qatari leader told his associates. "This is not the Dedi Barnea I know."

Barnea, his boss's prime minister, did hear from Qatar's prime minister in their first conversation that Hamas was willing to release the civilians, but also that the terrorist organization set unacceptable conditions, such as halting the IDF's incursion into Gaza and new rights for worshippers on the Temple Mount. Qatar's prime minister denies the claim. "On the first day, Hamas leaders did not set any draconian conditions," his adviser says, "because our threat to them was real, and they were not in a position to impose conditions at all."

Al-Thani did not give up. He called U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. "Listen," he told him, "there are hundreds of hostages in Gaza, and among them, in my estimation, dozens of civilians. They need to be released now. I offered

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the Israelis to mediate a quick deal for their release, but they are not interested."

Blinken informed al-Thani that he planned to fly to Israel within three days. "Let's wait," he reassured him. "I will speak with Netanyahu personally." Al-Thani pressed on. "You know that time is an important factor. We need to act now." Blinken stopped him. "Right now, the situation is complex. Israel is still under attack, and there's no one to talk to. We will wait three days."

The next morning, far from the diplomatic talks between Israel and Doha, Rawhi Mushatah, Sinwar's right-hand man, called Dahlan's associate, Samir Mashharawi. In a phone call from Gaza, Mushatah, on behalf of Sinwar, asked Dahlan to help them quickly find a mediator to advance a ceasefire deal. To lend weight to his request, Mushatah added: "Our friend is listening," referring to Sinwar, who was tuned in to the conversation.

Mashharawi reported the call to Dahlan. According to him, Dahlan told him that "first and foremost, they need to release all the civilians, the children, the elderly and the babies." Without that, there's nothing to talk about. What they did was madness. They didn't cross a red line; they crossed a black line. If the civilians are released, there will be a feeling in the Israeli public that there is something to talk about. If not, let them eat what they cooked."

Mashharawi conveyed Dahlan's message to Hamas. "Give me 24 hours and I'll get back to you," Mushatah replied. Surprisingly, he returned just one hour later. He had a message: Sinwar was ready to release all civilians. It should be noted that when Sinwar refers to civilians, he means only those up to 18 years old and over 50 years old.

"He told me that in the first stage, they had no problem releasing all civilians without anything in return," Mashharawi recounts. "I swear, those were his exact words: all civilians, without anything in return. They had only one condition: They wanted us to bring in an agreed-upon mediator as quickly as possible, so that negotiations could immediately begin over everything else – the release of soldiers and officers in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, and then the issue of the blockade on Gaza."

Dahlan activated his contacts with the Shin Bet and conveyed the information to them. According to Mashharawi, "the unofficial response Dahlan received from them was: 'Netanyahu doesn't want to talk about anything. He only wants war and the elimination of Hamas.' The Israelis' perception was: First, we eliminate Hamas, and then we'll retrieve the hostages by force."

Mashharawi: 'Sinwar told me that in the first stage, they had no problem releasing all civilians without anything in return. I swear, those were his exact words: all civilians, without anything in return. They had only one condition: They wanted us to bring in an agreed-upon mediator.'

A senior defense official admits that at least some of the proposals for the release of civilian hostages reached the Mossad, the Shin Bet and the prime minister. But according to him, even if they were concrete, the military establishment, which needed 24 hours to gain control of the situation, and even more so the stunned political leadership, were unable to discuss the matter in the first few days.

"To be honest," the senior official says, "the issue of the hostages was not seriously on the agenda at this stage, and no one at the military or political level was open to discussing the proposal. The release of the hostages did not even enter the list of war objectives formulated by the government on the night of October 7. Could the proposal have been properly discussed and a decision reached? In substantive terms, the answer is yes. But the prevailing mood was like after Pearl Harbor. We had just suffered a brutal blow, we were in the midst of war – who had the bandwidth to talk about stopping the fighting and starting negotiations now, even if it was to save the lives of dozens of people, whose final number was still unknown?"

Mashharawi recounts that on October 10, Mushatah called him again, on behalf of Sinwar, to find out if an Israeli response to Hamas' proposal had been received. "I told him: I am still waiting for a response from Israel," Mashharawi says. "I waited a few more days for a response, and I approached the Israelis again, but they were not in a state to talk at all. Meanwhile, within a few days, the bombing of Gaza intensified, and contact with Mushatah and Sinwar became impossible."

Blinken eventually arrived in Israel after six days. Immediately upon his arrival on Thursday, October 12, he met with Netanyahu, and the next day he continued to Doha for a meeting with Qatar's prime minister. "I raised the issue of the hostages' release with Netanyahu, but I did not receive a clear answer from him," the U.S. secretary of state told al-Thani. "Netanyahu is not there yet!"

Al-Thani reiterated his assessment that as days passed and Israeli attacks in Gaza intensified, claiming many lives, especially among civilians, Hamas' agreement to release hostages might expire. Blinken promised to try and speak with Netanyahu again. On October 14, shortly after his plane departed Doha for Washington, Blinken sent al-Thani a text message: "Netanyahu is ready for you to mediate. The Mossad director will arrive soon." The next day, eight days after al-Thani offered his services to the Israeli Mossad director, Barnea arrived in Doha.

Meanwhile, as could be expected, Hamas raised its price. A senior Shin Bet official who understood where things were headed recalls that as early as October 18, after the deadly barrage Israel unleashed on Gaza in those first days, he expressed his view that they should stop. "We should have taken a breath, bitten our lips, steered ourselves and taken the blow of releasing all the prisoners Hamas demanded. Then, we should have found the first opportunity to re-enter the war."

According to him, "the first hours and days after the abduction are the most critical. As the days pass and the military response intensifies, both sides tend to entrench themselves in their positions, and the price of the hostages rises. 'We also need to act with strategists,' I said. But when the idea reached the prime minister, he said: 'The moment a strategist comes to light, it is no longer a strategist; and that was the end of it.'"

Hints of Hamas' willingness to engage in flexible talks also reached Col. (res.) Doron Hadar, who for many years commanded the IDF's General Staff negotiation unit. "I started receiving messages, collecting intelligence and other data, and the picture began to clarify: Given the situation, with the other side also stunned, with Hamas alarmed by the international public relations damage created by the images of hundreds of hostages, elderly, frightened women, and crying children – we could create an agreement framework within which, if we wished, it wouldn't be difficult to later argue that Hamas violated it, and launch an attack."

"It is clear to me, of course, that our side is in complete shock, and no less than that, raging with anger. But ultimately, you expect the leadership to know how to separate



Mohammed al-Thani
Amer Haddad / AFP



Rawhi Mushatah

Throughout the meeting Netanyahu did not mention the warning calls he had received. "If we had known about the warnings ... it could have changed our entire assessment picture," says a senior Shin Bet official.



Mohammed Dahlan
Jack Robb / Reuters

emotional processes from rational ones, and to take a moment to consider what is actually the right thing to do at this point. Like making a deal with this devil, and then killing him."

In mid-October, Hadar attended a meeting held in the office of Ophir Falk, Netanyahu's foreign policy adviser, which dealt with the emerging order of war objectives. Hadar asked to present his perspective to the forum. "I asked Falk: 'Tell

me, do you understand what's happening here?'" Hadar recounts. "We can bring back the women, the children, now. This is a one-for-one exchange. We can initiate a move."

Falk stopped the discussion and asked the other attendees to leave the room. "I continued," Hadar recalls, "and I told him: 'Let's advance a deal. We'll offer them 1,000 prisoners, even 2,000 if we have to. The world is with us now, let's exert international pressure and advance a deal.'"

But Falk stopped Hadar. "There will be no deal here," he told him. "This is ISIS. They are murderers. They will get nothing. Change your mindset, Doron."

"The basic problem was that Hamas was looking for a 'permanent end to the conflict,' as they called it," concludes William J. Burns, the former CIA director, in his characteristically measured manner, summing up the labyrinth in which the hostage issue would become entangled. "Netanyahu was only willing to consider a 'first phase' deal, but claimed he had to constantly reserve the option 'to continue destroying Hamas later,' as he defined it. And that, for us, was always the challenge: How do we square this circle and manage to bring everyone back?"

The result was that, when it came to dealing with its citizens and soldiers held captive by the enemy, the State of Israel did indeed change its mindset. And so, another two years of war would pass before an agreement was signed that would bring back the last of the hostages from Gaza, alive or dead, with Hamas still standing.

The Prime Minister's Bureau called the investigation an "absolute lie."

"Prime Minister Netanyahu didn't speak to the president of the UAE during the period in question and received no warning from him," the response said.

Former Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar and former IDF Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi said that they had not been informed of the warning delivered by the president of the UAE.

Haaretz reached out to President bin Zayed for comment, but didn't receive one.



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