

HAMAS ISRAEL CEASEFIRE 2025: WHAT TO EXPECT?

By
Sarah Akram
Research Fellow

Centre For Afghanistan Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), ISSI

Edited by
Ms. Amina Khan

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After fifteen months of relentless military aggression by Israel, resulting in tremendous loss of human lives, colossal damage to infrastructure, and widespread instability in an already volatile region, a ceasefire was effected through the mediatory efforts of Egypt, Qatar and the United States. The initial deal had been authorized in May, 2024 by the then U.S. President Joe Biden.¹ Israel's genocidal war against Gaza has been one of the most destructive campaigns in recent history, with indescribable damage to the Gaza Strip and its surrounding areas. The Israeli military campaign was also extended to Lebanon and Iran, igniting fears that the war in Gaza could engulf the entire region. As per the agreed agreement, hostages and prisoners began to be freed, with ninety Palestinian prisoners and three Israeli hostages released in the first instance. A further release followed and Israeli forces started withdrawing to the buffer zones and the much-needed humanitarian aid began to flow into the territory.² Meanwhile, displaced Palestinians commenced their journey home, to destruction and despair.

¹ Patsy Widakuswara, Implementing Gaza ceasefire will be up to Trump, Voice of America, January 19, 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/gaza-ceasefire-set-to-begin-one-day-before-trump-s-inauguration-/7941448.html>

² Cara Ana, Here's what happens next during the ceasefire in Gaza, AP, January 26, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/gaza-israel-palestinians-war-ceasefire-explainer-bf5dd840354d69432737314bb67e183f>

While the ceasefire agreement has led to many exchanges and the return of Gazans to their homes, the recent meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu puts the future of the Palestinians in further jeopardy. President Trump has proposed a transformative approach to the Middle East, centering on the Gaza Strip. The plan entails the U.S. assuming control over Gaza, with the objective of its redevelopment. This initiative includes the resettlement of approximately 2 million Palestinian residents to neighboring countries, thereby altering the region's demographic and political landscape. The proposal has evoked significant international criticism. The aim is to reconfigure the region's geopolitical dynamics through the acquisition and redevelopment of Gaza, accompanied by the resettlement of its Palestinian inhabitants.

President in effect has signaled towards starting a new phase in the Middle East, regardless of the truce. This prompted warnings none other than the from the UN Secretary General. Washington's latest drift clearly appears in the direction of potential ethnic cleansing and severing U.S. commitment to a two-state solution. The proposal stands in direct contradiction to every regional priority that President has outlined since his presidential campaign. It would generate further conflict in Gaza and jeopardize Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. While its full implementation remains uncertain, the U.S. plan is already reshaping the situation on the ground.

Despite President Trump's remarks, the ceasefire has remained intact, thus far with hostilities at a standstill. Hamas is expected to release three additional Israeli captives in exchange for 183 Palestinians detained by Israel. However, the U.S. president's proposal raises concerns regarding the later phases of the truce, which include discussions on Gaza's future. The initial phase, which includes the release of 33 Israeli hostages, a surge of humanitarian aid to Gaza, and partial Israeli withdrawal from the region, is set to conclude by March 1. The second phase envisions the full withdrawal of Israeli forces, a permanent ceasefire, and the release of all remaining captives held by Hamas. The third phase proposes a five-year reconstruction plan for Gaza. President Trump's suggestion for the complete evacuation of Gaza's population is in direct conflict with the intent of the agreement.³

The ceasefire agreement entailed that starting on day fourteen, three Israeli hostages are to be released every seven days in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners. By the end of the 42-day period, all surviving women, children, and elderly individuals held should be freed. Eventually, the bodies of some hostages may also be part of the exchanges, as Israel believes that at least a third of the more than 90 captives still held in Gaza were either killed during the October 7, 2023 attack that

³ Ali Harb, What does Trump's ethnic cleansing proposal mean for Gaza ceasefire deal?, Al Jazeera, February 8, 2025 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/8/what-does-trumps-ethnic-cleansing-proposal-mean-for-ceasefire-deal?traffic_source

resulted in the conflict or have died in captivity. Although the Palestinians were meant to cross into Gaza, they will not be able to cross north through the area of Netzarim corridor as Yehoud had not been freed. Hamas has thus accused Israel of violating the ceasefire agreement by creating hurdles for the return of displaced Palestinians. Israel responded by saying that it will not allow the return of displaced Palestinians to northern Gaza until one of the Israeli captives, Arbel Yehoud is released.⁴

During the second phase of the ceasefire agreement, all remaining hostages are to be freed and this would be done in exchange for absolute Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and also the talks about the second phase would commence on the sixteenth day, (which was on February 3, 2025). Israel has stated that much will depend on how the first phase of the ceasefire will conclude. Israel has also stated that it will not agree to a full withdrawal from Gaza until Hamas' military and political capabilities are dismantled. In turn, Hamas has declared that it will not release the remaining hostages until Israel withdraws all of its troops from the area. Both sides will have to reach an agreement about how Gaza will be governed. This is likely going to give rise to contentions between the two sides. If by any means all sides reach the third phase of the ceasefire agreement, it could likely be relatively less challenging. The bodies of remaining hostages would be returned in exchange for a three- to five-year reconstruction plan in Gaza. However, the question about reconstruction remains vague. It may be seen that the destruction in Gaza, as a result of Israeli aggression was deliberate, with major infrastructure including schools, hospitals and homes completely destroyed. The persistent military campaign in Gaza has destroyed sixty percent of the major buildings since October 2023.⁵

The ceasefire was long awaited by the Palestinians, and the challenge of returning to destroyed neighborhoods casts further shadow on hope as the Gaza Strip requires major reconstruction. Although the ceasefire agreement has led to a halt in the daily bombardment and consequent destruction, the prospects of normalcy remain bleak. The human cost of the Israeli onslaught has been extremely heavy, with over 47,000 Palestinians killed and more than 111,000 injured.⁶

Though clearly welcome, the ceasefire does not promise a path to sustainable peace. Israel seeks complete destruction of Hamas and its military campaign has definitely dented the organization. However, the fact that Hamas still survives, is a reflection of its resilience. Huge challenges remain

⁴ Israel violates ceasefire by blocking return of displaced Gazans: Hamas, Middle East Monitor (MEMO) January 26, 2025, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250126-israel-violates-ceasefire-by-blocking-return-of-displaced-gazans-hamas/>

⁵ Israel and Hamas reach Gaza ceasefire deal, what are the next steps?, Al Jazeera, January 16, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/16/israel-and-hamas-reach-gaza-ceasefire-deal-what-are-the-next-steps>

⁶ Op.Cit, Israel violates ceasefire by blocking return of displaced Gazans: Hamas, MEMO

and even questions if this ceasefire will pull through its several phases. Governance remains a stupendous challenge. Former U.S. President Biden had put forth a proposal envisaging an interim administration under the shadow of the Palestinian Authority (PA), which exercises control over the West Bank, and one which would be assisted by other states in the Middle East region.⁷ However, differences between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are a major challenge. It is feared that the conflict may be reignited if the global community, and specifically the mediating states and especially the United States, does not play a role in convincing Israel to end the violence. For the Trump Administration, this conflict is also a stumbling block in the way of the Abraham Accords which it had brokered in 2020.

It is pertinent for global powers to find ways for ensuring lasting peace. Several states in the region have made clear that until normalcy returns to the region, specifically Gaza, there will not be any progress towards normalization with Israel. President Trump's ill-considered statements raise serve to undermine the prospects of stable peace and this can do irreparable damage to the future of a comprehensive peace in the region.

⁷ The Observer view on the Gaza ceasefire: it's time for both sides to think again, The Guardian, January 18, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/18/the-observer-view-on-the-gaza-ceasefire-its-time-for-both-sides-to-think-again>