

Ceasefire in the Gaza Strip

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On 19 January, Israel and Hamas reached a ceasefire, brokered with the involvement of Qatar, Egypt, and the United States. It consists of three phases, the first of which entails a cessation of hostilities and the gradual exchange of some Israelis held captive by Hamas for Palestinians detained by Israel. Negotiations on subsequent phases will depend on the progress of the first phase.

The agreement was reached after a series of failed attempts that have been made since May 2024. Given that its terms – to the best of our knowledge – differ only slightly from previous versions, the breakthrough appears to be driven by a changed context, primarily the shift in the US presidency and a different political dynamic in Israel.

Outbreak, course, and toll of the war

The ceasefire came after 15 months of war. On the one hand, it should be seen as another chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has taken various forms for over a century, and as the latest armed confrontation between Israel and Hamas – the fourth in the past two decades. On the other hand, it is an unprecedented conflict in terms of how it began, how it unfolded, and its consequences.

On 7 October 2023, Hamas – an organisation that combines Palestinian nationalism with political Islam and has controlled Gaza since 2006 – attacked Israel. The death toll included 379 Israeli soldiers and security personnel, along with 797 civilians, often with extreme brutality. Hamas bears direct and indirect responsibility for the deaths of these Israelis. At the same time, according to Israeli media outlets such as [Yedioth Ahronoth](#) and [Haaretz](#), some victims were likely killed by gunfire from Israeli forces responding in a chaotic manner.

The militants also abducted (or in the case of soldiers took captive) 251 people and brought them to Gaza. This group included civilians – both Jews and Arabs – as well as, soldiers, migrant workers (mainly from Thailand), and foreign nationals who had been attending a music festival near the border.

In response, Israel launched a military operation during which – amid openly genocidal rhetoric from its authorities (such as “We are fighting human animals,” or “It is an entire nation out there [in Gaza] that is responsible”) – at least 47,000 Palestinians have been killed and over 110,000 injured, while 60–70% of buildings have been destroyed or damaged. These casualty figures come from Palestinian sources but are also cited by the United Nations. They include both civilians and militants but do not account for the potentially large number of people whose bodies have yet to be found.

Since the beginning of the conflict, human rights organisations and international bodies have pointed out war crimes being committed by the Israeli armed forces . These allegations include:

- a) attacking civilian objects with the unverifiable justification that someone linked to Hamas was present there,
- b) failure to distinguish between militants and civilians by establishing unmarked 'kill zones,' where any trespassers were shot,
- c) adopting 'proportionality' criteria with an exceptionally high tolerance for civilian casualties even in attacks on military targets of secondary significance,
- d) destroying civilian buildings and infrastructure without a valid military reason,
- e) ethnic cleansing in parts of Gaza (primarily the north), during which residents were forced to flee and infrastructure was destroyed to prevent their return,
- f) blocking food supplies, thus effectively using starvation as a method of warfare,
- g) torturing Palestinian prisoners, including instances of rape.

As a result, South Africa brought a case against Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing it of violating the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Additionally, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued international arrest warrants for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant.

Israel dismantled most of Hamas's tactical units and killed the majority of its leadership. However, the group retained its ability to wage guerrilla warfare – the last Israeli soldiers were killed in Gaza just six days before the ceasefire – and to recruit new fighters to replace those killed. Some of Hamas's civilian structures also survived the war.

Ceasefire terms

During the first phase, in addition to halting hostilities, Hamas is expected to release 33 hostages. Following previous exchanges and multiple rescue operations by Israel, the group is believed to be holding 90–100 captives, with an estimated 50–70% presumed to be alive.

In return, Israel will release approximately 1,900 Palestinians, including those taken captive during the current conflict, individuals serving prison sentences (including life terms), and detainees held in administrative detention indefinitely without trial (including women and minors). The exchange will follow a predetermined framework over 42 days. Additionally, Israel is expected to withdraw its forces from urban areas (though they will remain in Gaza), allow humanitarian aid deliveries, and permit civilians to return to their homes.

Negotiations on the next phases will commence after 16 days. These are expected to address a "permanent end to the war," the exchange of the remaining Israeli hostages for another group of Palestinian captives, prisoners, and detainees, the full withdrawal of all Israeli forces from Gaza, and finally, the reconstruction of the territory. Since the agreement's details are known only through media reports, all information on its specifics should be treated with caution. Furthermore, the document's complex structure entails a high risk of implementation challenges and conflicting interpretations, which may be a deliberate move.

Particular uncertainty surrounds the second and third phases, which, despite being the most crucial, remain the least understood. Moreover, the agreement makes no mention of Gaza's

future political order – an omission that appears to satisfy both sides. For Hamas, this increases its chances of gradually rebuilding control over the Strip. For Israel, the absence of long-term political commitments ensures that discussions on any comprehensive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain stalled, a goal it has pursued for years. Additionally, this leaves Israel free to shape its policy towards Gaza as it deems appropriate, including the possibility of resuming hostilities.

The effectiveness of mechanisms employed to ensure the ceasefire's durability is also questionable, especially given the change of leadership in the United States. While Donald Trump's inauguration was one of the key political factors that led to the peace deal, and there was coordination between the outgoing and incoming administrations, it is difficult to assess the new president's commitment to maintaining peace in Gaza – even in the medium term. His remarks after taking office suggest uncertainty, as he admitted he was "not sure" whether all phases of the negotiated deal would be implemented, further stating, "This is not our war; this is their war."

Why was the agreement reached?

Joe Biden's administration, which consistently supported Israel and thus had to pay political costs of the war both domestically and internationally, attempted to broker an agreement as early as May and again in July 2024. Although both Israel and the United States publicly stated at the time that Hamas was "rejecting peace", multiple indications suggest that Israel was actually the main obstacle to progress (see, Ronen Bergman's article published in Yedioth Ahronoth on 16 January: [הממשלה הישראלית: 'החמאס סירב לשלום' – אבל האמת היא ש... |](#) [הארץ](#)). Due to political considerations – primarily concerns over the potential collapse of his coalition and loss of power – Netanyahu reportedly obstructed the peace deal, insisting on the inclusion of new terms, such as taking control of Gaza's border with Egypt. Meanwhile, the Biden administration, operating in the context of a presidential campaign and aiming to avoid accusations of insufficient support for Israel, refrained from exerting adequate pressure.

Trump's election temporarily prevented Netanyahu from manoeuvring between political forces in the US and increased pressure to secure a ceasefire, with the president-elect vowing to achieve it before taking office. However, the White House transition also provided Netanyahu with a convenient pretext – "Trump forced us" – to halt operations and at least formally accept some of Hamas's demands, such as withdrawing troops, at a point when continuing the war was no longer politically advantageous for the Israeli prime minister. By that time, maintaining power was no longer dependent on the conflict (as the government's political backing had expanded in September 2024), public support for the war was waning, and Likud's poll ratings, after a period of consolidation or stability, were beginning to decline.

Prospects

Israel has accepted conditions it had previously ruled out, such as the complete withdrawal of its forces. However, the provisions that Israel views as the most problematic have been deferred to the ambiguous second phase. Given that Trump may lose interest in the peace deal after his inauguration, the strongly pro-Israel stance of his administration, and Israel's influence on US public opinion, it is likely that the government in Jerusalem will seek to revise the terms. This could involve resuming attacks, even on a limited scale, or failing to

withdraw all troops.

To compensate the far right for the disappointment of halting military operations, Israel will likely intensify military actions in the West Bank. This includes operation Iron Wall, launched on 21 January, the acceleration of settlement expansion, and granting even greater freedom to nationalist militias carrying out attacks on Palestinians. The new US administration may have offered tacit approval for such measures – or possibly even formal annexations – as an incentive for Israel to accept the ceasefire.

Meanwhile, Gaza – devastated, with little chance of meaningful reconstruction, still governed by a weakened Hamas, and lacking prospects for a better future – is likely to remain a focal point of humanitarian crisis, instability, and, in all probability, further armed conflict.