

Israel breaks the ceasefire in Gaza

Marek Matusiak

On 18 March, Israel broke the ceasefire agreement adopted on 19 January and resumed its attacks on the Gaza Strip. In the following days, over 700 people were killed in airstrikes, including many children. The total Palestinian death toll in the conflict, ongoing since 2023, is estimated at approximately 50,000 (not including people whose bodies remain under the rubble). Israeli forces are also conducting ground operations in multiple areas – in the north near Beit Lahia, in the south around Rafah, and in central Gaza – resulting in the enclave being (once again) split in two. The offensive was preceded by a blockade of humanitarian aid to Gaza, imposed by Israel on 2 March, which included restrictions on food, medicines, and fuel. On 9 March, it also halted electricity supplies, affecting, among other services, desalination plants. On 18 March, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that his army's actions were 'only the beginning.' Defence Minister Israel Katz announced that unless Hamas releases the remaining Israeli hostages – 59 men, of whom 24 are believed to still be alive – and withdraws from the Gaza Strip, the only alternative would be its *'total devastation'*.

Israel's agreement to the January ceasefire – formally intended as a step towards a permanent resolution of the conflict – was likely imposed by Donald Trump, who sought a swift diplomatic success upon assuming office. However, the US President subsequently granted Israel de facto freedom to unilaterally alter the terms of the agreement or resume military operations. This is evidenced, among other factors, by a significant increase in US arms deliveries to Israel. Meanwhile, in domestic Israeli politics, the ongoing war with Hamas continues to serve as a tool for Prime Minister Netanyahu to consolidate his political base and deflect attention from contentious issues and controversial policies.

Ceasefire

The January ceasefire agreement outlined three consecutive phases, of which only the first – formally lasting until 1 March – was implemented. In accordance with the agreement, Israel recovered 25 live hostages and the bodies of a further eight. During this period, it temporarily halted military operations, withdrew some troops from Gaza (while keeping forces stationed along the Egyptian border), allowed the delivery of humanitarian aid, and released nearly 2,000 Palestinian war prisoners, detainees, prisoners and de facto hostages, many of whom had been held from Gaza were being detained without legal basis or justification. Despite its partial success, the implementation of this first phase was marred by multiple violations. Israel killed over 118 people in Gaza during the ceasefire and, contrary to the agreement, blocked the delivery of certain categories of aid (e.g. tents). Hamas, for its part, in one instance handed over the remains of an unrelated individual,

instead of an Israeli national.

The second phase – the details of which were to be negotiated during the first phase – envisaged Hamas releasing all remaining Israeli hostages believed to be alive (approximately 24 men) in exchange for a permanent end to the war and the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. Although Israel initially agreed to these terms, it now considers them unacceptable, a position backed by the United States. The Israeli government was willing to negotiate only on an extension of the first phase, involving further hostage releases in return for temporary ceasefires, but without withdrawing troops or ending the conflict. For Hamas, this would have meant relinquishing its main leverage without guarantees that Israel would not resume attacks once all hostages were recovered. It therefore rejected the proposal, which Israel subsequently used as a *casus belli*. Prime Minister Netanyahu has stated that negotiations will continue under the conditions of active military operations, in order to pressure Hamas into making concessions.

Israel's objectives

Netanyahu continues to state that the objectives of the war are: 'the recovery of hostages, the destruction of Hamas, and ensuring that Gaza no longer poses a threat.' However, he has not provided any metrics to assess progress on the second and third objectives, nor has he presented a vision for the future governance of Gaza. At the same time, he consistently rejects external proposals – except for the so-called Trump plan (see below) – particularly those that envisage the Gaza Strip ultimately remaining under any form of Palestinian administration. The most recent such proposal, put forward by Egypt during the Arab League summit in Cairo on 4 March, focused on the reconstruction of Gaza. It was rejected by both Israel and the United States.

In contrast, the Trump plan – essentially a set of slogans and a single AI-generated visualisation – envisions the forced evacuation (expulsion) of Palestinians and the transformation of Gaza into a luxury international resort under American patronage. The plan has been enthusiastically received in Israel as a 'bold and 'fresh' idea that would 'avoid repeating past mistakes.' It is now frequently cited by Israeli officials as the sole point of reference for any long-term 'resolution' of the Gaza issue.

Although implementation of Trump's vision appears unlikely, the concept of forcibly removing a significant portion of Gaza's Palestinian population – amounting in practice to ethnic cleansing – is being treated seriously by Israeli authorities. It aligns with *proposals floated by members of the Israeli administration since the start of the war*. Numerous indications suggest that this may be, if not the primary objective, then at least one of the goals Israel is actively pursuing.

Firstly, Israel continues to reject all proposals for a long-term settlement in the Gaza Strip while offering no alternative of its own. Secondly, it has cut off humanitarian aid, resumed large-scale attacks, and, through statements by Defence Minister Katz, has warned Palestinians that it is prepared to use 'a level of force they have not yet seen.' It has also announced a return to forced evacuations of parts of Gaza's population – in practice, mass internal displacement within a small territory where over 60% of buildings have already been destroyed.

If this scenario unfolds, Gaza will become increasingly uninhabitable. At the same time, Israel continues to reiterate its readiness to facilitate the emigration of Palestinians who choose to leave and has begun establishing [administrative structures to oversee this process](#). At the same time, both Israel and the United States are pressuring Egypt to open its border with Gaza and to host refugees in the Sinai Peninsula. In addition, international media have consistently reported on ongoing [negotiations between Israel, the United States, and several African countries – including Sudan, Somalia and Somaliland](#) – regarding the potential resettlement of forcibly displaced Palestinians. In exchange, these countries would receive political and economic incentives.

If the plan to force the mass emigration of Palestinians fails, the only realistic alternative scenario appears to be a state of deliberately prolonged conflict – of varying intensity – designed to prevent the emergence of any stable order in Gaza. Israel does not seek to administer the Strip directly as an occupying power, nor does it intend to allow any Palestinian political groups or structures (including the Palestinian Authority), international bodies or Arab states – except those it considers ‘reliable’, such as the United Arab Emirates – to take control. A likely outcome could involve a limited Israeli military presence in Gaza, focused on the border with Egypt and along Israel’s own frontier, combined with the permanent deployment of private military contractors.

The domestic political situation in Israel

Prime Minister Netanyahu is widely perceived in Israel – by both opponents and supporters – as a politician who leverages the war in the Gaza Strip for personal political gain, shaping the pace and direction of military operations to suit his own interests. This perception extends to his months-long reluctance to halt the war last year, despite pressure from the Biden administration, and to his current decision to resume hostilities.

Domestically, the renewed offensive in Gaza serves Netanyahu in several ways. First, it strengthens his political base ahead of key parliamentary votes. Following the resumption of military operations, the far-right Jewish Power party – known for its blend of religious and nationalist extremism – rejoined the ruling coalition after a two-month absence. As a result, the coalition now holds 68 seats in the 120-member Knesset, affording Netanyahu greater flexibility in negotiating with his five coalition partners over the 2025 state budget, which must be passed by 31 March to avoid the automatic dissolution of the government and a snap election. At the same time, the return of Jewish Power to government increases the likelihood of a prolonged conflict, as the party views the indefinite continuation of military operations in Gaza as one of its core political objectives.

The resumption of war in Gaza also serves to divert public attention, at least in part, from issues that are politically inconvenient for Prime Minister Netanyahu. These include the attempted dismissal of Ronen Bar, head of the Shin Bet security agency, which is conducting an investigation into several of Netanyahu’s close advisers suspected of engaging in paid lobbying on behalf of Qatar. The ongoing conflict likewise enables the Prime Minister to continue delaying the legal proceedings against him, which involve charges of corruption and abuse of office.

Finally, the continuation of military operations in Gaza bolsters Netanyahu’s electoral standing. While public support for the Prime Minister and his coalition remains below pre-7 October 2023 levels, it is significantly higher than in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas

attack. According to current polling, Netanyahu's bloc would not secure a parliamentary majority if elections were held today – yet neither would the opposition. This scenario would allow him to remain in office as caretaker Prime Minister, a position he previously held for over a year between 2019 and 2020.