Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 15.10.2025 www.osw.waw.pl

Gaza Strip: a ceasefire with vague prospects for peace

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On 9 October, Israel, Hamas, and mediators (including Steve Witkoff) signed a document in Egypt concerning the end of the war in Gaza. It provides, among other things, for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from within the Strip, the admission of humanitarian aid, and the exchange of Israelis held by Hamas (around 20 still alive) for a number of the Palestinians imprisoned or detained by Israel (nearly 2,000). Both sides have started implementing these provisions since 13 October, marking the first phase of a comprehensive plan to end the conflict in the Gaza Strip, presented by Donald Trump at the end of September. The plan stipulates, among other elements, that Trump will symbolically head the body supervising Gaza's post-war administration.

Also on 13 October, the presidents of the United States, Turkey, and Egypt, together with the Emir of Qatar, signed the Trump Declaration for Enduring Peace and Prosperity in the Egyptian city of Sharm el-Sheikh – in the presence of representatives from 26 other countries (the Israeli prime minister declined to attend). The document expresses support for the US leader's efforts to end the war in Gaza and announces cooperation aimed at stabilising the region.

Despite Trump's claims that he had brought the war to a definitive end and the initial successes of the plan – namely the suspension of most hostilities and the exchange of detainees between the parties – the prospects for peace in Gaza remain uncertain.

Commentary

- **The Israel–Hamas agreement and the summit in Egypt represent the most serious attempt to end the war since Israel broke the ceasefire in March** (negotiated in January with the support of both the outgoing and incoming US administrations). They are the result of Trump's personal involvement, which was made public in the form of a 20-point comprehensive plan during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington on 29 September. Several factors may have influenced the US president's determination to end the conflict: his (unfulfilled) hopes for the Nobel Peace Prize, Israel's attack on the capital of Qatar – a key US ally – on 9 September, and the growing wave of public criticism in the United States over Israel's actions in Gaza.
- **The current attempt to bring the war to an end stands out due to the scale of Trump's personal involvement and the inclusion of third countries in the process.** The president has put his name to it, addressed the Knesset on the issue (on 13 October), effectively acted as host of the summit in Egypt, and is to symbolically head the body supervising Gaza's post-war administration. The importance of the process is heightened by the

participation of Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar, which are signatories to the declaration, took part in negotiating the agreement, and are to monitor its implementation. The extensive media coverage of the summit and the repeated assurances by the US president that this marks the end of the war – rather than merely a ceasefire – are intended to limit Netanyahu's room for manoeuvre, above all to prevent him from resuming the conflict once Israel has recovered its citizens.

- **In the short term, the US president's efforts appear to have a chance of success. They do not, however, guarantee that the plan will progress beyond the first phase,** nor that Israel – until recently committed to continuing the war – will not delay, dilute, or unilaterally reinterpret its subsequent stages (while assigning blame to the other side). In this context, Netanyahu's absence from the summit in Egypt, and the fact that he is not a signatory to the declaration adopted there, are noteworthy. This means that Israel has assumed obligations only under the currently implemented 'first phase' and formally retains freedom of action in what follows.
- **The need for Trump to employ such extensive means – with uncertain results – illustrates the limitations faced by the United States in exerting effective pressure on Israel,** despite the fact that Israel remains dependent on it in many respects and that Washington has spent between US$31 and US$34 billion on its defence, directly and indirectly, over the past two years (*figures compiled by Brown University*).
- **The subsequent stages of the plan, intended to lead to lasting peace, are formulated in vague terms and contain neither a timetable nor enforcement mechanisms compelling the parties to implement them.** They include, among other points: Hamas's renunciation of governance in Gaza; its disarmament; amnesty for fighters who lay down their arms and the right for the remaining ones to leave Gaza; the opening of the border crossing with Egypt; the destruction of 'all military, terrorist, and offensive infrastructure, including tunnels'; the further withdrawal of Israeli forces (which will nevertheless remain within the borders of the Strip); the post-war 'redevelopment' of Gaza; the transfer of administration of the Strip to a technocratic body composed of Palestinians and overseen by a Peace Council chaired by Trump and including, among others, Tony Blair; and finally, the temporary deployment of 'International Stabilisation Forces' in Gaza, made up in part of units from Arab states. However, these assumptions have not been specified in any formal agreement and therefore are not binding. Moreover, they place Israel in a much more advantageous position, as it will have the right to review Hamas's actions while, according to the provisions of the 20-point plan, committing itself only to refrain from occupying the entire Strip.