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‘The deal still has to be approved by Israel’s ministers’

After 15 months of bitter conflict in Gaza, a ceasefire deal appears to have been reached. Scott Lucas on the final hurdles and the future of Hamas

After 15 months of bitter conflict in the Gaza Strip, a ceasefire deal has been agreed that promises an end to the fighting and will allow for the access of food and other desperately needed humanitarian aid to the civilian population. Since the Israel Defense Forces launched their ground operation in Gaza in October 2023 in response to the Hamas terror attack of 7 October, more than 46 000 Palestinians are reported to have been killed, including 17 492 children. More than 1.9 million of the Gaza Strip’s 2.2 million inhabitants have been displaced, and much of the infrastructure and housing has been destroyed or badly damaged.

What do we know about this ceasefire deal?

Despite hopes for several days that a ceasefire might finally be agreed, there are still twists, turns and uncertainty. Even as Qatar was announcing that its prime minister, Sheikh Mohammed al-Thani – who is also the country’s foreign minister – would hold a press conference, the *Associated Press* announced that the talks had hit a last-minute snag with Israel blaming Hamas.

Just after 5pm GMT, Israeli as well as Hamas and Qatari officials said Israel and Hamas had accepted a three-stage deal. But an hour later, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said the agreement was still not confirmed.

Under the agreement, in the first, six-week stage, around 1 650 Palestinians will be released from Israeli prisons. Meanwhile, 33 of around 95 hostages – some alive, some dead – will be freed by Hamas and other groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Israeli forces will withdraw from population centres, Palestinians will be allowed to start returning to their homes in northern Gaza. And there will be a

surge of humanitarian aid, with around 600 trucks entering each day.

In the second stage, Hamas has pledged to release the remaining living captives, most of them male soldiers, in exchange for release of more Palestinians and the 'complete withdrawal' of Israeli forces from Gaza. In the third phase, the bodies of remaining hostages would be returned in exchange for a three to five-year reconstruction plan in Gaza under international supervision.

At 5.02pm GMT, Donald Trump posted on his Truth Social website confirming that a deal had been agreed.

But if Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu – the long-time obstacle to a final agreement – dropped his objections, he could face unrest within his cabinet from hard-right members. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has called on Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to join him again in thwarting an agreement.

So, the important caveat to any celebration is that the deal still has to be approved by Israel's ministers.

We've been here before — what has changed?

The three-stage proposal was put forward last May and discussed through the summer. In September, one of Israel's lead negotiators, Mossad head David Barnea, returned to Qatar amid hopes for a resolution. But Netanyahu then publicly imposed the condition that Israeli troops continue their occupation of two areas in Gaza, the Philadelphi Corridor along the Egypt border and the Netzarim Corridor across the centre of the Strip.

It is unclear why Netanyahu appears to have now decided to accept a ceasefire. Some reports cite a meeting with Steve Witkoff, the envoy of incoming US President Donald Trump. But Trump effectively gave Netanyahu a blank cheque in October, saying: 'Bibi, do what you have to do.'

The Israeli political environment is far more likely to be instrumental. Netanyahu has been under pressure for months from former members of his war cabinet, Benny Gantz and the now-dismissed defence minister, Yoav Gallant, as well as from opposition parties and from sections of Israeli society, notably the families of hostages.

Netanyahu had long resisted that pressure, preferring the 'open-ended' war with the quest to 'absolutely destroy' Hamas. He may now calculate that his agreement to stop, with Hamas far from destroyed, does not look like a capitulation to Hamas, the Biden administration or his domestic foes. He may present the agreement as a pragmatic step, given the change of power in the US with a new president who

will sing his praises.

Still, he faces the risk that a ceasefire could mean early elections as his government fractures. That could mean a return of focus to his trial on bribery charges. And so, up to the last minute, he will hesitate, waver, and confuse.

Israeli and Arab officials may be flattering Trump's ego with the portrayal of Witkoff's intervention swaying the prime minister. There has been no indication of what pressure or incentive the envoy brought Netanyahu. One possibility is that the incoming Trump administration has signalled that it will accept an expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian West Bank. This would reinforce the position taken by Trump in his first term, and the hard-right Israeli ministers Ben-Gvir and Smotrich could drop any ceasefire objections in return for an assurance of Washington's support.

Can Netanyahu make this deal stick at home?

If Netanyahu's cabinet votes to accept the agreement, the Israeli prime minister should be able to ride out the immediate opposition from the right-wingers. Opposition leaders have already backed the deal, and much of the Israeli population is weary of the military campaign and just wants the violence to end.

Although Netanyahu cannot claim 'absolute victory' over Hamas, which is his long-stated goal, he can point to the decimation of the organisation's top ranks. Since the latest round of the conflict began in October 2023, Hamas has lost its military leader, Yahya Sinwar, its political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, and Mohammad Deif, the planner of Hamas' mass killings inside Israel on 7 October, 2023. Most importantly, Netanyahu can present the return of all of the hostages. He'll hope for a boost, but just from the celebrations of the families of those still alive, but also from the families of the dead, who will have a chance at closure.

How about the future of Hamas and Gaza?

Hamas will have to rebuild, probably with Yahya Sinwar's brother Mohammed as the new leader. Its political and military commands will have to re-establish themselves. But the group has survived inside Gaza. Not only has it not been expelled, but at this point, there is no apparent alternative to its governance. So, it will have to be involved at some level not only in the maintenance of the ceasefire but in the reconstruction operations.

As for Gaza's civilians, they have long been the expendable pawns in this conflict. They are the large majority of the more than 46 000

killed — which is a conservative figure. At least 1.9 million, out of a population of around 2.2 million, are now displaced and in dire humanitarian conditions.

While the ceasefire would halt Israeli attacks and allow some people to return to their homes, the situation is likely to be precarious. The Netanyahu government could always threaten a resumption of airstrikes, if not ground assaults, or obstruction of humanitarian aid.

Hamas, which was not enthusiastically supported before by many civilians because of economic and social issues, appears to have sacrificed most of Gaza's civilians for its headline moment on 7 October, 2023. It is not clear what long-term future they can offer those who have survived.

Donald Trump's about to take power — did that change things?

Whether or not Trump's envoy Witkoff had a direct role in the move towards a ceasefire, the advent of Trump 2.0 could have mobilised all those involved in the talks to make a final push for a settlement. Given the unpredictable and often incoherent approach of Trump, and his propensity to side-line and dismiss senior advisors, there is no assurance over future direction of US policy after 20 January. Netanyahu might have benefited from Trump's blank cheque, but all others – Hamas and other groups in Gaza as well as the Arab States – would likely be operating in a sphere of uncertainty.

Meanwhile, as headlines swirled about the politics and the personalities, the 15-month reality continued. In the 48 hours leading up to the agreement being signed, at least 123 people have been killed and several hundred others injured by Israeli attacks across Gaza.

Does the killing finally end? And for how long?

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