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Ceasefire between Hamas and Israel: From Gaza's Devastation to a Redefinition of the Middle East

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The recent ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel, with provisions such as Israel's gradual withdrawal from Gaza, the release of Palestinian prisoners, and the reopening of the Rafah crossing, marks a pivotal moment in one of the world's most complex conflicts. The disclosed terms of the agreement, particularly the mechanisms for Israeli oversight of the Rafah and Netzarim crossings, signal Israel's gradual retreat in response to mounting regional and international pressures. At first glance, the agreement may appear to represent diplomatic progress. However, the reality of the Middle East emerging from the deal reveals a region still ensnared in complex conflicts and rapid geopolitical shifts.

Contrary to prevailing narratives, one striking aspect of the current Middle Eastern landscape is that the so-called Resistance Axis finds itself in a markedly different position than it did prior to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on 7 October 2023. The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, once considered a cornerstone of this axis, has significantly challenged the regional standing of the "resistance movement."

Hamas, also once a critical arm of the Resistance Axis, is similarly facing a precarious position. While the group managed to surprise Israel with Al-Aqsa Flood, the cost has been the destruction of Gaza's infrastructure and an escalating humanitarian crisis. Despite achieving a symbolic victory early on, Hamas's military and political capabilities have been significantly weakened under the extensive pressures exerted by Israel and the international community.

Similarly, Hezbollah in Lebanon, despite its pre-Al-Aqsa Flood military and political clout, now finds its capacity to advance the Resistance Axis's objectives increasingly constrained. The prevailing political structures in Lebanon operate with considerable independence from Hezbollah's influence. While the group still maintains a significant presence in the Lebanese parliament and government, the broader political environment in Lebanon has become more fragmented and challenging for Hezbollah. The ongoing economic crisis, coupled with widespread political disillusionment, has led to calls for reform, which limits Hezbollah's ability to operate without resistance.

Before 7 October, Israel was actively normalizing relations with Arab countries like Saudi Arabia. However, this process now faces significant obstacles. Arab governments, under the pressure of domestic public opinion, have altered their rhetoric on the Palestinian issue. Yet this shift is more tactical than strategic, as many of these states continue their covert relations with Israel. The ceasefire agreement may provide an opportunity for the normalization process to resume.

While the ceasefire has afforded Israel a temporary sense of stability, the domestic and international costs of this conflict have been immense. Prime Minister Netanyahu's government faces unprecedented domestic criticism, and Israel's global standing has suffered significantly due to the severity of its attacks on Gaza.

Following the unexpected attacks by Hamas on 7 October 2023, Israel initiated a comprehensive military operation in the Gaza Strip with several declared key objectives:

1. *Dismantling Hamas's Military Capabilities*: Israel sought to neutralize Hamas's ability to govern and launch attacks from Gaza, focusing on destroying its military infrastructure to prevent future threats.
2. *Securing the Release of Israeli Hostages*: A critical goal was the unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups, addressing both humanitarian concerns and domestic pressures.
3. *Ensuring Long-Term Security*: Israel sought to end Hamas's control over Gaza, aiming to prevent the group's resurgence and ensure long-term security by establishing a new governance structure in the region.
4. *Maintaining Regional Deterrence*: By executing a decisive military response, Israel intended to deter other regional actors, such as Hezbollah and Iran, from initiating similar attacks, thereby maintaining its strategic deterrence.
5. *Preserving International Support*: Throughout the operation, Israel framed its actions within the context of self-defence to maintain support from key international allies, particularly the United States.

These objectives underscore Israel's multifaceted approach to addressing immediate security threats while attempting to reshape the strategic landscape in Gaza to prevent future conflicts. By pursuing this comprehensive approach, Israel aims to achieve a balance between neutralizing immediate threats and reshaping the geopolitical environment in Gaza, with the goal of establishing long-term stability and deterrence against future hostilities.

Israel's evolving strategy since Al-Aqsa Flood demonstrates a shift from dealing with existential threats on multiple fronts to focusing on localized threats in Gaza. The collapse of the Assad regime, Türkiye's indirect intervention through its support for certain opposition groups in Syria and reduced Hezbollah influence have eased Israel's strategic pressures. However, the persistent threat from Hamas in the south ensures that Israel's security challenges are far from resolved.

The dynamics surrounding Israel's acceptance of the ceasefire, and its post- 7 October positioning, can be analysed in the context of several geopolitical shifts:

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria significantly disrupted the cohesion of the Resistance Axis, especially insofar as Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria are concerned. Israel has capitalized on this development to neutralize threats from its northern and western fronts through targeted strikes on military infrastructure in Syria, limiting Iran's ability to supply weapons to Hezbollah and other resistance groups. By diminishing the existential threat from the northern front, Israel has alleviated the "choking" effect that previously constrained its strategic flexibility. This allowed Israel to focus more directly on Hamas in the south without fear of simultaneous escalations from Syria or Hezbollah.

For Hamas, regaining the trust of its people is an urgent priority, but doing so will require financial resources and political support that appear increasingly elusive. For Israel, internal crises and dwindling international backing present challenges that could fundamentally reshape its political landscape.

Türkiye's direct involvement in post-Assad Syria regional developments, like supporting HTS, has altered the geopolitical calculations in the Levant. This presence complicates Hamas's traditional alliances, particularly with Iran and Syria, and creates additional diplomatic channels a new operational environment for Türkiye as a Palestinian sympathizer, that constrain Israel's military strategies. Türkiye's efforts to position itself as a traditional regional power and benefactor for Muslims interests create a new layer of geopolitical complexity, as it seeks to expand its soft power in relation to the Palestinian issue while balancing relations with Israel and other Arab states.

Israel, meanwhile, has reinforced its military foothold in western Syria by targeting Iranian supply lines, weapons depots, and key logistical hubs. This strategy has limited Hezbollah's operational capabilities and disrupted its ability to establish a strong military presence near the Golan heights. By maintaining dominance over these critical points, Israel has mitigated the risk of cross-border attacks and neutralizing Hezbollah's capacity to operate freely to the same extent as before. However, these dynamics also present risks for Israel that the orientation of the dominant groups in Syria may increasingly adopt an anti-Israel strategy.

The establishment of a new government in Lebanon, by reducing reliance on Hezbollah and pushing the group back behind the Litani River, has weakened the group's regional position and limited its ability to coordinate attacks against Israel. This political shift stabilizes Israel's security position along the northern front. Moreover, the growing influence of other political factions and movements, which advocate for a more neutral stance and internal reform, poses a challenge to Hezbollah's traditional approach, increasingly limiting its capacity to shape Lebanon's policies in line with the broader objectives of the Resistance Axis.

Israel has secured indirect security guarantees through its operations and strategic positioning, particularly in Syria and Lebanon. These efforts have reduced immediate threats from the north and west, enabling Israel to focus on containing Hamas. Israel's first priority in the conflict is Hamas. Essentially, after Hezbollah's direct intervention and the fall of Damascus by the Assad opposition, the grounds were prepared for Israel to militarily occupy parts of Lebanon and Syria. However, the south remains unstable, as Hamas retains the capability to disrupt Israel's internal security. The ceasefire reflects a temporary measure to manage the southern threat while addressing broader regional concerns. The south remains a critical vulnerability due to Hamas's ability to conduct surprise attacks and destabilize the region. These attacks undermine Israel's strategic gains in other theatres, highlighting the asymmetric nature of these threats.

Israel's acceptance of a ceasefire reflects its recognition of the limits of military action in eliminating Hamas's threat while seeking longer-term guarantees for southern security. Dean G. Pruitt and Jeffery Z Rubin, in their book "Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement, 1994" argue that the "all-or-nothing" strategy in conflict resolution involves pursuing total victory or achieving maximum objectives without compromise, often at the risk of prolonged conflict and instability.

This approach can lead to significant losses when goals remain unmet, forcing a shift toward negotiation or ceasefire.¹

In the context of Israel's recent actions post-7 October, the ceasefire reflects recognition of the limitations of an "all-or-nothing" strategy. Israel faced mounting international pressure (UN and global humanitarian actors), severe humanitarian costs, and operational challenges in Gaza, which made achieving total military objectives untenable. The ceasefire allowed Israel to recalibrate, secure critical security guarantees, and avoid further reputational damage while maintaining leverage for future engagements.

In *Crisis Escalation and Negotiation in International Conflicts*, Jonathan Wilkenfeld and Michael Brecher argue that if the guarantees obtained during the negotiations, such as restrictions on Hamas's military capabilities or greater control over Gaza's borders, do not enable Israel to achieve its long-term objectives, the "all-or-nothing" strategy could resurface.² Accordingly, Israel may interpret the ceasefire as a tactical pause, resuming maximalist pursuits if conditions favour their strategic dominance. Game theoretic principles, such as those examined in Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation*, suggest that actors in high-stakes conflicts may revert to aggressive strategies if trust and compliance mechanisms fail.³

Although the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel is widely seen as a turning point in the Gaza conflict, it cannot be regarded as a fundamental shift in the Middle East's power dynamics. This agreement reflects more of a tactical adjustment than a strategic transformation. It represents a temporary pause in hostilities, where both sides, while benefiting in the short term, remain far from achieving their ultimate objectives. The broader geopolitical environment, particularly the entrenched divisions within Palestinian politics and the broader regional rivalries, remains largely unchanged. The ceasefire may have provided a momentary respite, but it does not address the core issues fuelling the conflict, such as the political status of Gaza, the broader Israeli-Palestinian dispute, or the regional balance of power.

In the aftermath of the ceasefire, the Middle East is a region where traditional powers like Iran and the Resistance groups face significant challenges, while emerging powers like Türkiye, Qatar, and Egypt seek to fill the vacuum left behind. This transformation is shaped by specific factors and criteria that each of these three actors have effectively leveraged.

1. Active Diplomacy and Political Flexibility

• *Türkiye*: Particularly under Erdogan's leadership, Türkiye's foreign policy has focused on multilateral diplomacy, mediation in conflicts, and the use of soft power. The country's involvement in the

¹ Dean G. Pruitt and Jeffrey Z. Rubin. *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement*. 2nd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

² Jonathan Wilkenfeld and Michael Brecher. *Crisis Escalation and Negotiation in International Conflicts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984).



Palestine-Israel conflict, close relations with Hamas, and active presence in crisis zones like Libya and Syria reflect its efforts to expand regional influence.

- *Qatar:* Qatar has utilized its substantial financial resources and an extensive media network (such as Al Jazeera) to mediate regional conflicts. It also supports Palestinian resistance groups and provides humanitarian aid to enhance its standing.
- *Egypt:* As one of the largest and most consequential Arab states, Egypt capitalizes on its geopolitical position (e.g., control of the Suez Canal) and its role as a mediator, particularly in the Palestinian issue, to regain its regional prominence.

2. Economic Power and Financial Resources

- *Türkiye:* Despite recent challenges, Türkiye's economy remains one of the largest in the region. It strengthens its ties with Middle Eastern and African nations through development projects and trade agreements.
- *Qatar:* With massive revenues from natural gas exports, Qatar has established itself as a major economic player in the region, using financial support to states and groups as a tool to expand its influence.
- *Egypt:* Egypt leverages its natural resources, key infrastructure, and strategic location to attract foreign investments and foster economic collaborations.

3. Role in Crisis Management

- *Türkiye:* Türkiye's military and political presence in crises in Syria, Iraq, and Libya underscores its role as an active and influential player in regional conflicts.
- *Qatar:* Qatar's ability to mediate between conflicting parties and support reconstruction in crisis zones has positioned it as a key actor in regional disputes.
- *Egypt:* Egypt's mediation in ceasefires between Israel and Hamas demonstrates its efforts to restore its traditional leadership role in the Arab region.

4. Soft Power and Cultural Influence

- *Türkiye:* Türkiye utilizes cultural tools such as television series, the promotion of its tourism industry, and an emphasis on Ottoman heritage to strengthen its appeal in Arab and Islamic societies.
- *Qatar:* Al Jazeera, as a powerful media outlet, plays a significant role in shaping regional and global public opinion.

- *Egypt*: Egypt continues to wield cultural influence in the region through its historical legacy in arts, literature, and Arabic culture.

5. Geopolitical and Strategic Position

- *Türkiye*: Türkiye's strategic position as a bridge between Europe and Asia, along with its control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, enables it to play a critical role in regional issues.
- *Qatar*: Qatar's strategic location and its close relationship with the United States (hosting the Al Udeid Air Base) provide it with powerful leverage in advancing regional policies.
- *Egypt*: Egypt's geopolitical significance stems from its control of the Suez Canal, its borders with Gaza and Israel, and its role in the security of the Red Sea, making it a key regional player.

Today's Middle East is in a state of flux. The Resistance Axis has lost the coherence it once had, while Israel no longer enjoys its former unchallenged dominance. The Resistance Axis, hampered by Iran's position, Hezbollah's limitations in Lebanon, and the loss of critical allies like Syria, faces profound challenges. Meanwhile, Israel grapples with international pressure, internal divisions, and its inability to effectively manage the Gaza crisis.

Due to Iran's reduced access to resistance forces in the region, there is speculation that Iran may alter its deterrence strategy. Tehran has repeatedly stated that if it faces an existential threat, it will reconsider its nuclear program, possibly moving towards a more aggressive stance. This shift could complicate regional stability, as the potential for Iran to develop nuclear weapons in response to perceived threats would likely escalate tensions with neighbouring countries, especially Israel, and could provoke a broader arms race in the Middle East, further destabilizing the region.

Ultimately, the future of the Middle East hinges on the competition between regional and international actors and their ability to navigate these crises. While the ceasefire may offer Gaza's people a brief respite, it alone cannot guarantee peace or herald a significant change in the region's power dynamics. Therefore, while the ceasefire may mark a tactical shift, the structural factors influencing the region's instability remain largely in place, making a true strategic transformation difficult to achieve without deeper, more comprehensive negotiations.