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Situation Assessment | 21 January 2025

Hamas-Israel Ceasefire Agreement: Implications and Challenges

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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A full 471 days into Israel's genocide in Gaza, the ceasefire agreement between Hamas and the Israeli occupation, mediated by Qatar, Egypt, and the United States, entered into force on 19 January 2025. Having taken advantage of Operation "Al-Aqsa Flood", carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023, to wage a bloody war against the Palestinians of Gaza, Israel has since killed more than 47 thousand people, most of them women and children, and left 110 thousand seriously wounded, with more than 10 thousand missing. The Israeli army has systematically destroyed Palestinian cities, towns, and camps in the Gaza Strip, targeting residential buildings and infrastructure, including those that provide civilians with essential services such as electricity and water. It has demolished or bombed beyond recognition educational, medical, religious, and United Nations buildings, economic, industrial, and agricultural facilities, and transportation routes. The genocide has served not to pursue the declared war goals of eradicating Hamas and recovering the purpose, but to satisfy the desire for vengeance and the true goal of making the Gaza Strip uninhabitable and killing or displacing the greatest number of Palestinians possible.

Outline of the Agreement

The latest agreement was based on the one reached between Hamas and Israel on 27 May 2024, then blocked by Benjamin Netanyahu, and consists of three main phases, each lasting 42 days. The first phase will consist of a limited prisoner exchange, a partial withdrawal of Israeli troops and increased humanitarian aid. The second includes the completion of the prisoner exchange and Israel's full withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, while the third includes an agreement on reconstruction and the exchange of bodies between the two parties.

While the details of the first phase of the agreement have been agreed upon, negotiations on the second phase will begin 16 days into the implementation of the first.¹ The mediators will ensure the continuation of indirect negotiations between Hamas and Israel, and the continuation of the ceasefire, until an agreement is reached to complete the second and third phases of the prisoner exchange and end the war. Although there are no guarantees that Israel will abide by the continuation of the ceasefire once the first phase is complete, especially if the negotiations are prolonged, it is likely that the pressure of the mediators will prevent Israel from resuming the war.

The agreement includes a precise timeline for a prisoner exchange between the two sides over 42 days, according to which 33 Israeli detainees (out of the 98 held by Hamas), all of whom are female civilians and soldiers, children and civilians over 50, will be released. In exchange, Israel will release 1,760 Palestinian prisoners, including 290 out of 563 Palestinians serving life sentences, as well as more than 1,000 prisoners from Gaza who have been arrested since 8 October 2023 and who *did not* participate in the 7 October offensive.

The occupying Israeli army will gradually withdraw, according to the first phase of the agreement, from inside the Gaza Strip to a border strip along the boundary with Israel, 700 metres wide, with

¹ "Israel-Gaza ceasefire: Full text of agreement", *Middle East Eye*, 15/1/2025, accessed on 20/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQuc>



the exception of five specific points that are more than 700 metres wide by 400 metres at most. The occupation army will gradually reduce its forces from the Philadelphi Corridor/Salah al-Din axis that separates Gaza from the Egyptian border, withdrawing its forces completely no later than the 50th day after the deal comes into effect.

The agreement allows for the return of displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to their homes. On the seventh day, pedestrians will be allowed to return north via al-Rashid Street, unarmed and without undergoing security screening. On the 22nd day, they will be allowed to return north via Salah al-Din Road, unarmed and without inspection. On the seventh day, vehicles will also be allowed to return north after being inspected at the Netzarim corridor by a private company determined by the mediators in coordination with Israel.

The agreement stipulates the daily entry of 600 trucks, 50 of which will carry fuel, and 300 of which will be sent to the north of the Strip. The Israeli army will also gradually withdraw from the Rafah crossing based on the August 2024 consultations with Egypt. The crossing will be opened to transport wounded and sick Palestinian civilians once all female Israeli civilians and soldiers have been released. 50 wounded Palestinian fighters will be allowed to cross daily, accompanied by 3 individuals, subject to Israeli and Egyptian approval.²

Netanyahu's Attempts to Prolong the War

Since the beginning of the genocide, Netanyahu has sought to prolong the war for as long as possible in order to achieve both the declared and undeclared war goals. Netanyahu and his government's efforts to prolong the war are intertwined with domestic political considerations. Most notably, Netanyahu is aware that stopping the war will lead to early Knesset elections, which his camp will lose, according to multiple public opinion polls. Netanyahu's attempts to prolong the war have been driven by his desperation to maintain the cohesion of his far-right government coalition and its comfortable majority in the Knesset, the weakness and division of the Israeli opposition, the shift of Israeli society toward the far and fascist right, which calls for the continuation of the war, and the Biden administration's failure to exert any serious pressure to stop the war. While providing Israel with various forms of military, financial, economic, political and diplomatic support the war, including by obstructing Security Council resolutions calling for it to stop and protecting it from international institutions imposing sanctions on it, the Biden administration effectively greenlighted the war. Furthermore, the White House allowed Netanyahu to retreat, in May 2024, from a prisoner exchange agreement that Biden had already announced following supposed Israeli government approval.

Why Now?

Several factors contributed to Netanyahu's sudden acceptance of the ceasefire agreement, most notably, the position of US President-elect Donald Trump, who has repeatedly insisted that the

² Ibid.

war must stop before he takes office on 20 January 2025. Trump's Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, has been actively involved in the ceasefire negotiations in recent weeks, in coordination with the Biden administration. In this context, Witkoff made it clear to Netanyahu that Trump expects him to approve the deal.³ Furthermore, the security and military establishment leadership, headed by the army Chief of Staff and the directors of the Mossad and the Shin Bet, have expressed their clear support for reaching an agreement with Hamas that would guarantee the return of the Israeli captives and end the war on Gaza. They have stressed on numerous occasions that the Israeli army has exhausted its military capabilities in the Strip, and that completely eradicating Hamas rule requires a political alternative on the day after the war. In addition, the military establishment has stressed that prolonging the war has exhausted the regular army and reserve forces, and that stopping fighting is necessary to ease the burden on them.

In addition, pressure has mounted from the families of the detainees and their supporters within Israeli society. There is also growing support among Israeli elites for their demand to conclude a prisoner exchange and stop the fighting in the Strip, especially among public opinion leaders and the media, which has been reflected in the increasing support of Israeli public opinion for concluding the deal. An Israeli public opinion poll showed that 73 percent of respondents support the prisoner exchange agreement and an end to fighting in the Strip, while 19 percent oppose, and 8 percent have no opinion on the matter.⁴

Finally, the steadfastness of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and the continued military resistance against the Israeli occupation, despite incurring heavy losses, must not be underestimated. It has become clear that the Israeli military has no chance of releasing the Israeli detainees alive through a military operation. Since Netanyahu backed out of the prisoner exchange agreement in May 2024, Israeli incursions and airstrikes have led to the killing of at least eight detainees, while a further 122 Israeli officers and soldiers have been killed in combat, and hundreds have been wounded.⁵ Moreover, the return of the Israeli army in October 2024 to fighting in the Jabalia and Beit Hanoun camps in the northern Gaza Strip governorate, after occupying it and displacing its residents several times, has demonstrated its failure to eliminate the resistance there. In the three months preceding the signing of the agreement, 55 Israeli officers and soldiers were killed, 15 of whom in the last ten days alone.⁶

Challenges Facing the Agreement

Serious obstacles face the transition from the first to the second stage of the ceasefire agreement, mainly manifested in Netanyahu's desire to continue the war for as long as possible. Despite the withdrawal of Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, from the government coalition,

³ Amos Harel, "The price Israel is paying for the kidnapped soldiers deal is heavy, but it cannot be stopped," *Haaretz*, 14/1/2025, accessed on 20/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQq0> (Hebrew)

⁴ "73 percent support the crystallized deal," *Maariv*, 17/1/2025. (Hebrew print)

⁵ Harel

⁶ Yossi Yehoshua, "The Prices Will Be High," *Ynet (Yedioth Ahronoth)*, 14/1/2025, accessed on 20/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zR0j> (Hebrew)

claiming that it will return to the coalition if the war on Gaza is resumed after the first stage,⁷ the coalition still has a majority of 62 of 120 in the Knesset. Despite the threats of the Religious Zionist Party led by Bezalel Smotrich to withdraw from the government if Israel does not resume the war after implementing the first stage, it is doubtful that it will carry out this threat. However, the threat is more than likely due to the fierce competition between these two parties to gain the support of the extreme religious and fascist right-wing public, and at the same time, to strengthen Netanyahu's position with the US President. The possibility of moving from the first to the second phase, among other factors, heavily depends on the level of pressure exerted by the new Trump administration on Netanyahu to move forward with the second and third phases of the agreement.

Conclusion

The ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel opens up prospects for ending the genocide waged by Israel upon the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. The displaced can begin to return to their homes and work on rebuilding the Strip. This will require Palestinian national unity and an Arab position that mobilizes the international community to pressure the far right and fascist government in Israel to uphold the ceasefire.

⁷ Noa Spiegel and Michael Hauser-Tov, "Otzma Yehudit: We will leave the coalition tomorrow in protest of the prisoner release deal," *Haaretz*, 18/1/2025, accessed on 20/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQyn> (Hebrew)