

# Gaza Ceasefire: Implications for Israel, Hamas, and U.S. Policy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Former Israeli and U.S. officials discuss the deal’s timing, provisions, and near-term prospects, outlining the Trump administration’s practical options for advancing peace in Gaza and beyond.**

**O**n January 17, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Dennis Ross, Matthew Levitt, and Neomi Neumann. Ross is the Institute's Davidson Distinguished Fellow and a former U.S. special envoy to the Middle East, with service in four administrations. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow, director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and former deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Treasury Department. Neumann is a visiting fellow at the Institute, former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency, and coauthor (with Ghaith al-Omari) of the 2024 report '[Reforming the Palestinian Authority: A Roadmap for Change](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reforming-palestinian-authority-roadmap-change)' (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reforming-palestinian-authority-roadmap-change>). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Dennis Ross

The terms of the new Gaza ceasefire are virtually identical to the ones that Israel presented to President Biden in late May; what seems to have pushed the agreement over the finish line is the "Trump effect." The remarkable coordination between the outgoing and incoming administrations signaled to Egypt, Qatar, and Israel that concluding the agreement was a priority for Washington despite the change in office. Incoming Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff's participation in the late stages of the negotiations suggests that the Trump administration is prepared to remain engaged on the agreement's subsequent phases.

For its part, Hamas seems desperate for a reprieve and presently has little incentive to violate the ceasefire. This will make it all the more difficult for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to break the agreement himself, especially if Trump presses Israel to honor its terms. Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel is a top regional priority for Trump, and this is impossible with Israeli troops still in Gaza.

As the ceasefire continues, several key challenges must be addressed:

- Preventing the smuggling of weapons and other materiel to Hamas, especially across the Egypt-Gaza border.
- Choking off funding to the group.
- Closely monitoring how materials meant for reconstruction are used.
- Establishing an interim administration that can provide civil order to Gaza and prevent Hamas from reasserting power.

The terms of the agreement bring immediate gains for Israelis and Palestinians alike: namely, the return of hostages, and a halt to the bombardments that have produced a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. In the longer term, however, the deal does not address the looming questions that will determine the conflict's outcome. If the Trump administration uses the agreement as a launching point for intensive diplomatic engagement on this issue, there is great potential for major progress. Yet regardless of the administration's willingness to engage, a fraught implementation process lies ahead.

## Matthew Levitt

Many analysts have pointed to the severe damage inflicted on Iran's "axis of resistance"—Hamas's military capabilities in particular—as proof of the group's strategic failure. Yet the truth is that Hamas was willing to suffer losses in carrying out a spectacular attack against Israelis so long as it remains part of Gaza's political fabric once the dust settles. Apparently, its true strategy is to relinquish its governance role in Gaza and refocus attention and resources on its doctrinal mandate of jihad against Israel. For all its losses in personnel, equipment, infrastructure, and leadership since October 7, Hamas can now wave its flags in Gaza and claim victory simply by virtue of surviving. The loss of civilian lives was another cost it was willing to pay—as Hamas leaders repeatedly stated, the group aimed to win the battle for international public opinion by forcing Israel to inflict heavy damage that resulted in civilian casualties.

Of course, rolling out a few hundred fighters to celebrate the ceasefire and swarm the Red Cross vehicles transferring hostages back to Israel does not mean that Hamas is capable of running Gaza—nor does it want to. Again, the group is eager to give up the burdens of governance in favor of a Hezbollah-style model in which it retains influence over local politics but is not burdened by bureaucracy. This is why forming an alternative governance structure in Gaza is of paramount importance. Without another entity exercising authority over the civil administration, Hamas will simply exert itself over select government functions that serve its interests best, furthering its strategy of weaponizing Gaza's state apparatus without expending substantial resources of its own.

In terms of personnel, some observers claim that the group has recruited as many fighters as it has lost in the past fifteen months, but this seems unlikely. Even if numerically true, it would not account for the difference in quality of fighters lost compared to new recruits. Israel has killed huge numbers of militants with many years of experience, while most of the new recruits seem to be vulnerable children with no combat experience who join Hamas for pennies a day.

Regarding the ceasefire, it is important to recognize that for Israel, the agreement will only ever be a temporary cessation of hostilities. Israeli forces will likely transition from full-scale war in Gaza to night raids and targeted counterterrorism operations, complicating the question of who is willing and able to fill the governance vacuum. As the Trump administration takes the helm, it must ensure that the ceasefire does not set up conditions that advance Hamas's strategy or undermine the peace that the agreement seeks to bring about.

## Neomi Neumann

**T**he signing of the ceasefire agreement raises two key questions: Why did the deal materialize now after sitting on the table since May? And what are its implications for both sides?

For Hamas, anything that enables it to survive is considered an achievement at this point. The timing of the deal was therefore tied to the perception

that the “hostages card” was losing its value for Hamas over time as more of the captives died. Moreover, local conditions have become more difficult for Gazans in the months since winter arrived, likely spurring even Hamas’s supporters to ask the group to stop the war and ease the losses, destruction, and disease.

For Israel’s part, Prime Minister Netanyahu was convinced to sign the agreement due to pressure from the incoming Trump administration. Now that he has obtained a temporary reprieve from U.S. and domestic pressure, Netanyahu will likely have greater leeway to confront other regional challenges—especially Iran, but also potential threats from Syria and Turkey.

It is unclear if the ceasefire deal will reach its third and final stage, which is supposed to include major tasks such as implementing a five-year reconstruction plan, enshrining the military disarmament of Hamas, and lifting the Israeli blockade on Gaza. This progress will mainly depend on the extent of Trump’s commitment to advancing the deal and his willingness to fully shut down the fighting in Gaza. If Washington and its partners do not foster an alternative to Hamas governance, the group will eventually recover, reassert its rule in Gaza, and increase its malign influence in the West Bank, essentially returning to the pre-October 7 reality.

To prevent this scenario, the best solution at present is to [let the Palestinian Authority return to Gaza \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pa-reform-key-west-bank-stability-and-possible-rule-gaza\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pa-reform-key-west-bank-stability-and-possible-rule-gaza) and take over. This is hardly an ideal option, but it is less bad than the available alternatives of Hamas rule, chaos, or global jihad.

*This summary was prepared by Cleary Waldo. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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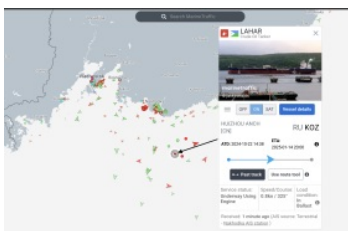
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