

Trump Gives a Green Light to Resume Fighting in Gaza—But Does Netanyahu Want to Do It Now?

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Brief Analysis

A hostage ultimatum from Washington seemed to provide Netanyahu with the freedom of action he wanted, but Israeli domestic realities may not allow him to break the ceasefire just yet.

On February 10, President Trump delivered an **ultimatum** (<https://youtu.be/bvZyKuq-4EI?si=Ij2gEmGCt62XdE-C>) on Gaza: if Hamas does not release all of the hostages by noon on February 15, then he will call for cancellation of the ceasefire and “let all hell break out.” He added that this was just his advice, stating “Israel can override it.” The implication was clear: Israel can restart the war if it so chooses.

Coming on the heels of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s visit to the White House last week, the announcement might indicate that Netanyahu persuaded Trump about the importance of resuming the fight amid concerns about the ceasefire’s next phases. The current phase calls for thirty-three of the remaining seventy-three hostages to be released, but Hamas **claimed** (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250210-%F0%9F%94%B4-hamas-s-armed-wing-says-next-gaza-hostages-release-will-be-delayed-until-further-notice>) yesterday that it would suspend the release scheduled for February 15 because Israel has not been meeting its ceasefire obligations. Trump’s declaration may or may not have been a response to that statement. The day before, the president **remarked on** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-says-us-might-lose-patience-with-ceasefire-deal-over-israeli-hostages-2025-02-10/>) the gaunt state of three hostages released on February 8: “They look like Holocaust survivors...I don’t know how much longer we can take that.” He is now calling for the release of “all hostages” rather than the staggered release spelled out in the current deal.

After a cabinet meeting earlier today, Netanyahu **warned** (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/netanyahu-warns-ceasefire-terminated-trump-threatens-hell-gaza-hamas-doesnt-free-hostages/story?id=118680442>) that Israel could return to war on February 15 if hostages are not released. Three are slated for release that day. Yet by not mentioning a specific number in his warning, the prime minister seemingly skirted Trump’s ultimatum and

stopped short of jettisoning the phased approach or demanding that all hostages be freed by Saturday. Likewise, Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar reportedly urged cabinet ministers to avoid publicly endorsing Trump's ultimatum for fear of endangering the next release.

Netanyahu Balancing Trump with Political Realities at Home

The prime minister has seemed more focused on getting Trump's general backing for a return to fighting than entangling himself in the president's specific pronouncements, whether this week's ultimatum or last week's "Gaza Riviera" proposal. Netanyahu likely wants to be solicitous of Trump without being fully bound by the president's ideas, at least some of which **are likely impracticable (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/king-abdullah-must-show-trump-practical-arab-ideas-gaza>)**.

The prime minister sees phase one of the ceasefire as advantageous to Israel because of the many hostages being gradually released. Yet he seems to view phase two as a trap that will require Israel to fully withdraw from Gaza, thereby curtailing its ability to continue security operations against Hamas. Many observers anticipated that Netanyahu's Washington visit would result in Trump forcing him to move on to phase two as scheduled at the end of February. Yet the opposite seemed to occur—in his public remarks **at the White House (<https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-pmstatement050225>)** and subsequently **at the Knesset (<https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/news/pressreleases/pages/press10225u.aspx>)**, the prime minister emphasized that Israel must "complete the defeat of Hamas and...the other goals of the war, including the return of all our hostages." He then **refused (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-dispatches-delegation-to-doha-but-further-delays-talks-on-hostage-deals-2nd-phase/>)** to authorize his negotiating team to hold scheduled substantive talks in Qatar about phase two.

Although Netanyahu's tactics could reflect a deep personal conviction about defeating Hamas, they cannot be divorced from domestic political calculations. The fear that his coalition might collapse is likely peaking right now amid maneuvers by two far-right members of the cabinet—National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and his faction left the coalition after the ceasefire deal was reached, while Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has **threatened (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-far-right-ministers-oppose-gaza-ceasefire-deal-with-hamas-2025-01-19/>)** to bring down the government if it goes through with phase two. Another deadline looms as well—the government will automatically be dissolved if it does not pass a budget by March 31. Meanwhile, a **February 10 poll (https://13tv.co.il/item/news/politics/politics/rhyyt-904456605/?heyday_src=heyday_search)** revealed that 67% of Israeli respondents favor proceeding with phase two (including 49% of voters from the prime minister's Likud Party), apparently believing this is the way to free all the hostages.

Green Light Raises More Questions

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Netanyahu believes he now has a U.S. green light to resume the fighting, whether at the end of phase one or even sooner if the next tranche of hostages are not released. But if Israel does in fact return to war, would this doom the remaining hostages? And how will Israeli leaders devise a strategy to completely defeat Hamas when they have failed to do so for the past fifteen months? More important, how long can they put off formulating a **"day after" approach (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-trump-arab-leaders-and-israel-can-close-gaps-gaza>)** to Gaza? Destroying Hamas appears to be Netanyahu's guiding objective, with all else secondary. The Israeli public is skeptical that the government can both "completely defeat" Hamas and free all the hostages. Some say Netanyahu has chosen his top priority but has no strategy to defeat Hamas—something he will need to come up with soon in order to achieve his goals.

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