

Flare-Up in Gaza (Part 1): Israeli Political Implications

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

Nov 16, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tajwj-ghzwt-aljz-alawl-altdayat-alsyasyt-alasraylyt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/tajwj-ghzwt-aljz-alawl-altdayat-alsyasyt-alasraylyt) /

[Farsi \(/fa/policy-analysis/tnsh-dr-ghzh-bkhsh-1-pyamdhay-syast-asrayyl\)](/fa/policy-analysis/tnsh-dr-ghzh-bkhsh-1-pyamdhay-syast-asrayyl)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

Netanyahu's government has splintered following a new round of violence, raising questions about the utility of escalation versus reinstating the ceasefire with incremental infrastructure improvements in Gaza.

This PolicyWatch is the first in a two-part series on the latest hostilities between Israel and Hamas. *Part 2* discusses (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/flare-up-in-gaza-part-2-gently-undoing-a-gordian-knot>) the status of Egyptian-brokered ceasefire talks.

Earlier this week, an Israeli special forces raid against Hamas targets in Gaza triggered the heaviest fighting seen between the two sides since the 2014 war. In the aftermath, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) favored reinstating the Gaza ceasefire—a position that triggered a cascade of domestic political developments. Deeming this policy too accommodating, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman resigned in protest, prompting Netanyahu to meet with Education Minister Naftali Bennett in a bid to preserve their coalition's razor-thin Knesset majority (61 seats to 59). They failed to reach an agreement, however, making it likely that Netanyahu will be forced to dissolve his government and move to early elections. Although the new election date has not yet been announced, it will presumably fall in the coming months, setting the stage for contentious campaign debates on the country's current security calculus.

WHY NETANYAHU AND THE IDF ADVOCATE CEASEFIRE

Polls conducted after the Gaza flare-up indicate that 74 percent of Israelis are unhappy with Netanyahu's handling of the crisis. Yet the prime minister and IDF still favor preserving the ceasefire arrangements that Egypt has been brokering for months. Their reasoning is twofold.

First, many senior security officials see Gaza as a distraction from Israel's primary military challenge: keeping Iran

from entrenching a Hezbollah-style military infrastructure in Syria. The seriousness of this priority became evident earlier this year when Israel broke the taboo on directly attacking Iranian military assets, including a May 10 operation in which seventy such targets were struck inside Syria.

Second, some officials question whether further military operations in Gaza would achieve any worthwhile gains. Shortly before this week's fighting, Netanyahu stated that Israel does not seek an "unnecessary war" in Gaza, language that he does not usually employ in public. Meanwhile, his government backed efforts by the UN envoy, Egypt, and Qatar to increase fuel deliveries to Gaza, which could help double the territory's daily electricity supply and improve its sewage capacity.

In return, Hamas was expected to rein in demonstrations near the Gaza security barrier, which have frequently escalated into mass arson attacks on Israeli agricultural fields near the border. The group's leaders have made clear that another war will not help them given Israel's overall military advantage; in their view, retaliatory strikes are a better means of shaping the situation to their advantage, at least in the near term.

Yet the consensus on avoiding war and improving infrastructure could mask a key analytical difference between Netanyahu and the IDF: namely, whether to pursue a major economic shift in Gaza. Netanyahu is more reticent than the generals on this point, with critics arguing that he favors the status quo in order to keep the Palestinian polity weak and divided between Gaza and the West Bank. Others believe he is beholden to domestic pressure stemming from the families of dead Israeli soldiers, whose remains Hamas continues to hold as a bargaining chip for a future prisoner release. These families and associated political factions demand that Israel oppose major improvements in Gaza until the remains of their loved ones are returned, amid unfounded hope that this can somehow be achieved without a massive release of Hamas operatives.

Yet Israel's debate over whether to facilitate economic aid to Gaza may be moot if Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas continues to oppose such measures. The prevailing view is that extensive investment in the territory requires the internationally backed PA to reclaim local authority from Hamas, which many governments regard as a terrorist group. Instead, Abbas has refused any such return and attempted to block various economic benefits, including the above-mentioned fuel deliveries. His reasons for doing so will be discussed at length in Part 2 of this PolicyWatch—whatever his goal may be, the practical result is that Israeli engagement with Gaza will remain incremental for the time being.

Some argue that Israel should ignore the PA and reach a long-term ceasefire with Hamas, but that approach would raise quandaries of its own. Many observers would likely accuse Israel of willfully dividing the Palestinian people. Moreover, such a move could further undermine the PA (an entity that has supported recognition of Israel's statehood) while empowering Hamas (a group that could use a ceasefire as an opportunity to rearm).

POLITICAL JOCKEYING

Despite Israel's heated debate about reestablishing the ceasefire, Netanyahu has tellingly averted an actual cabinet vote on the matter. The ministers have heard much from security officials about the importance of a ceasefire, and it is unclear whether critics have put forward any alternative proposals that address the costs of door-to-door fighting in Gaza, never mind the implications of reassuming security control over lands that Israel withdrew from in 2005. Yet the two most prominent critics, Liberman and Bennett, are locked in a battle to succeed Netanyahu, so they have sought to consolidate a right-wing flank based on perceived opposition to the ceasefire approach.

For his part, Netanyahu likely realizes that most voters have no appetite for another Gaza war. Yes, many of his Likud Party constituents live in southern Israel, where the latest salvo of Hamas rockets fell, but he seems to believe they will oppose further escalation once they are reminded about the high cost in blood and treasure. He is also well

aware that his predecessors Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert were toppled from power in the aftermath of major outbreaks of violence (i.e., the second intifada in 2000-2001 and the Lebanon war in 2006).

The full political implications of this week's developments are not yet known, though elections seem imminent given Netanyahu's unwillingness to meet Bennett's demand for the defense portfolio. In addition, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon has been pushing for early elections because he believes the prime minister is too beholden to ultraorthodox and hard-right factions, so his center-right Kulanu Party and its ten Knesset members may seek to exert themselves more forcefully if they join another Netanyahu coalition. Whatever the case, moving the timetable up would hold clear benefits for Netanyahu. Despite unfavorable ratings on the Gaza crisis, recent polls put him ahead of other candidates, and he could score a victory before facing potential indictments stemming from multiple police investigations. In fact, he might regard a win as a public mandate to actively oppose these investigations while he holds office for another term.

THE U.S. DIMENSION

Early elections in Israel also serve the Trump administration's interests. The ongoing delay in presenting a new U.S. peace plan has led some to speculate that Washington is sparing Netanyahu from having to deal with this issue on the campaign trail—where he would be torn between preserving his close relationship with the White House and addressing right-wing objections to some of the plan's provisions. By waiting until after early elections, U.S. officials may hope that the next Netanyahu government will incorporate centrist parties that are more receptive to President Trump's ideas. (The administration's formal position is that its plan will emerge in the next two months, but many are skeptical of this claim due to past delays.)

To be sure, the gaps between Netanyahu and Abbas make it unlikely that a U.S. peace plan could succeed anyway. Yet early elections could at least affect the Israeli political map at the margins. They also provide better timing for the Trump administration than the original schedule of November 2019, when the U.S. presidential campaign season would have made a peace push too difficult politically. Of course, as developments proved this week, actions on the ground can shake up the best-laid plans. The durability of the ceasefire will tell U.S. officials all they need to know about the prospects for making headway on substantive peace initiatives in the coming months.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and helped create its interactive mapping tool 'Settlements and Solutions: Is It Too Late for Two States?'

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/settlements-and-solutions> " ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Facing Syria's Food Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

[\(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)