

# Who Won the Gaza War? Not Hamas

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**Hopefully, the latest ceasefire agreement will herald a new beginning for Gaza, liberating the innocent people of that shattered place from the dead-end ideology of a terrorist regime and any more of its "victories."**

If the reported terms of the Gaza ceasefire agreement reached Tuesday are accurate, Hamas just spent nearly two months and more than 2,000 Palestinian lives fighting for three more nautical miles of fishing waters and 200 meters of additional border land. Hamas leaders may declare for the cameras that they achieved a great victory over Israel, but the details of the agreement -- and what it augurs for the possible future of Gaza -- should worry them.

It's not a coincidence that up to the end, Khaled Meshaal, Hamas's political chief sitting in the comfort of a Qatari hotel room, was reportedly fighting a rear-guard action inside his own movement -- against compromise, and against the Egyptian-brokered deal. Hamas officials in Gaza, sitting in rather less comfort in their underground bunkers, better understood the massive toll the war was exacting on the people of Gaza and on Hamas personnel and infrastructure. But Meshaal likely better understood the high politics of the ceasefire negotiations: The only leverage Hamas had was continuing to fire rockets, in the bitter hope of improving the terms offered it.

Hamas under Meshaal's guidance rejected numerous variations of the limited deal it eventually signed -- the latest instance being two weeks ago, when a nearly identical Egyptian proposal was also on the table. "Israel does not respond to our demands in the negotiations," Meshaal told an Iranian television station as recently as Sunday, "[therefore] we do not see a need for a ceasefire."

Two days later, and purportedly against Meshaal's wishes, Hamas agreed to a ceasefire deal that did not meet most of the demands the group had set forward during the conflict. The overarching demand for a lifting of the blockade around Gaza -- in place since Hamas's 2007 coup against the Palestinian Authority -- dissipated into an undefined Israeli commitment to increase the flow of humanitarian aid and reconstruction material into Gaza, an increase of the aforementioned fishing waters from 3 nautical miles to 6 (and not the 12 miles demanded), and a gradual reduction of Israel's security buffer zone along the Gaza border from 300 meters to 100 meters.

Egypt, in a separate deal, reportedly agreed to open its Rafah border crossing with Gaza, although even this concession has apparently not been guaranteed. Regardless, the opening of Rafah isn't expected to take place immediately since Cairo has conditioned the move on a return of Palestinian Authority security forces to the crossing. In this, Rafah isn't an outlier -- the ceasefire terms call for the PA to retake control of all of Gaza's border crossings from Hamas. Moreover, the PA will also coordinate and lead the much needed reconstruction of Gaza, with perhaps a role for Hamas on a committee tasked with humanitarian assistance.

As for many of Hamas's heavier demands -- a seaport, an airport, release of prisoners -- discussions will only begin in Cairo after a month of the ceasefire holding and with no public guarantees, either. Israel, in return, can be expected to then raise the issue of demilitarizing Gaza, an obvious non-starter for a militant group such as Hamas. Finally, salaries to Hamas' public sector workers -- a longstanding Hamas demand given that these 40,000 employees haven't drawn a paycheck in months -- will likely only take place once the PA completes a thorough vetting process.

Taken as a whole, Hamas was neither able to break the "siege" of Gaza (given continued Israeli and Egyptian conditions on access and movement into the coastal enclave) nor guarantee payment to its people. All the conflict did was invite death and destruction -- and pave the way for the PA's return to Gaza. The ceasefire agreement, however, is just vague enough for Hamas to hold up as a "victory" -- a message it has reinforced constantly since the deal was signed, with jubilant public rallies and bellicose official statements.

Tellingly, the lack of tangible gains for Hamas hasn't translated into a sense of triumphalism on the Israeli side. Seven weeks of war, 70 casualties and more than 4,000 rockets fired at its population centers have taken a toll on the Israeli national mood. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cratering approval ratings over the past two weeks are one sign of the public's disenchantment with the lack of a clear-cut decision in the campaign. The economic costs to Israel of the conflict, measured in budgetary expenses and declining growth rates, are not insignificant either. Whole swathes of Israel's south bordering Gaza had to be evacuated on account of the incessant rocket and mortar fire, with Hamas rockets for the first time consistently reaching Tel Aviv and beyond -- even briefly shutting down foreign air travel into the country's only international airport.

Netanyahu is now likely banking on the short memory of the Israeli public working in his favor once life in the country returns to normal and children are able to start the school year next week, as planned. It's worth remembering that last time Netanyahu fought a war against Hamas, in November 2012, he similarly cut a deal and ended the conflict after eight days. Citizens in the south protested the move, as they are doing now, with a famous picture of army reservists spelling out "Bibi, Loser" published on the front pages of most newspapers. This time the backlash in the political arena, and particularly within his governing coalition, will be fiercer. Early elections were mooted even prior to the war. Now, rivals on the right, especially Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Economy Minister Naftali Bennett, are likely to use Netanyahu's indirect negotiations with Hamas as a launching pad for their respective campaigns.

For Netanyahu this was apparently a risk he was willing to take, probably because all the other options available to him vis-a-vis Hamas were extremely unpalatable. The Israeli premier consistently limited the objective of the campaign, sufficing with a simple "returning quiet to the citizens of Israel" -- which he has now achieved. Hamas has undeniably suffered a serious military blow, with most of its strategic arsenal (long-range rockets and offensive tunnels) destroyed. Coupled with the ceasefire agreement's allowance for a more rigorous inspection regime at Gaza's borders, Hamas' ability to re-arm is in serious question. The PA's return to Gaza will undoubtedly be difficult and uneven, but Netanyahu has shifted his tone in a positive way when publicly discussing the role his former bete noire, PA President Mahmoud Abbas, can play in Gaza.

And if the ceasefire framework and the PA security forces and the international inspection mechanism for Gaza were to fail? Even then, Israel and Egypt will retain the levers of control they had over the territory prior to the conflict. All this without the need for an expansive ground campaign into Gaza of unknown duration and cost (in Palestinian and Israeli lives as well as Israel's international standing), let alone a re-occupation of the territory that was called for by many on the Israeli right. Netanyahu didn't cave to populist pressure, and did the wise thing by agreeing to a deal that stops a war he very much didn't want.

Whether the ceasefire agreement holds and turns into a more durable solution for Gaza is at this point unclear. Standing on the cratered and rubble-strewn streets of Gaza City Tuesday, Hamas leaders who hadn't been seen in public for weeks ventured out of their bunkers and addressed their people, predictably declaring victory. "What has taken place is not the end," one prominent Hamas spokesman avowed, "but rather one round of many rounds of this conflict (with the permission of God, the almighty and exalted) with the Israeli enemy until we liberate our people, our land, and our holy sites." The ceasefire may collapse in a month or, as in previous rounds between Israel and Hamas, a few years. But there is a hope that this latest war and ceasefire agreement herald a new beginning for Gaza -- liberating the innocent people of that shattered place from the dead-end ideology of a terrorist regime, and any more of its "victories."

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