

# The Hamas Ceasefire: Historical Background, Future Foretold?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

The arrival of U.S. envoy General Anthony Zinni in Jerusalem today comes during a relative lull in the terrorism and violence that has characterized the Israeli-Palestinian scene since the eruption of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000. This lull is at least partly due to the December 21 decision of Hamas to suspend attacks against Israel. But a review of the eight years since the signing of the Oslo Accord shows that this is actually the ninth ceasefire that Hamas has offered or declared during that period.

## Ceasefire Redux

The following chronology reviews Hamas ceasefires since 1993:

On October 20, 1994, a week after the murder of kidnapped IDF soldier Nachshon Wachsman, senior Hamas leader Imad Falouji (now a minister in the Palestinian cabinet) declared that Hamas's military wing would continue to fight until Israel withdrew from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Days later, however, Hamas offered Israel a ceasefire, occasioned by the first Palestinian Authority (PA) effort to clamp down on Hamas military activity, as well as the PA's own efforts to reach an internal ceasefire accord with Hamas. That internal accord broke down three weeks later into bloody fighting between Hamas and the PA, which eventually spilled over into attacks on Israeli soldiers.

Bad blood between Hamas and the PA continued into 1995. Israelis were targets as well, as the breakdown of the previous ceasefire led to a two-month period that left over fifty dead as a result of suicide bombings and bus attacks. Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yassin declared "merciless war" against Arafat, calling the PA an arm of Israeli intelligence, and stated that peace with Israel would be "a crime against Islam." In mid-February, Israel began its own crackdown on Hamas by arresting senior leader Shaykh Jamal Hamami. Within days, Hamas offered Israel a ten-year truce on the condition that Israel withdraw from Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Despite this offer, two weeks later Hamas activists wounded five and killed two in an attack on Jewish settlers.

Meetings in Cairo in December 1995 saw the first formal attempts at reconciliation between the PA and Hamas. After a hesitant start in which Hamas rejected offers of representation in formal Palestinian decision-making as well as suggestions for a truce with Israel, it did a volte-face and announced its intention to halt attacks against Israel. According to Hamas spokesperson Mahmoud el-Zahar, this was intended to give the PA "time to see how far it can get" in negotiations with Israel. Soon thereafter, Hamas also agreed to run in Palestinian elections.

That ceasefire—if it indeed was—ended with the January 5, 1996, killing of Yahya Ayyash, "the Engineer" and architect of numerous terrorist attacks against Israel. Ayyash's death was the ostensible trigger for a series of Hamas terrorist attacks, including a string of suicide bombings in late February—early March 1996 that left fifty dead and more than two hundred injured. Following these attacks, Arafat, under intense Israeli pressure, arrested hundreds of Hamas militants. Itself under heavy Palestinian, Israeli, and international pressure, Hamas offered a new ceasefire proposal on March 1, calling for the release of prisoners in Israeli jails and an end to what it called "organized terrorism against Hamas and its Izz al-Din Qassam [sic] brigades." This offer had a time limit, though, and shortly after it was rejected by Israel, a Hamas suicide bomber killed himself and nineteen others on a Jerusalem bus.

Three months later, on June 20, a Hamas leaflet offered Israel another ceasefire, on condition that Israel end "Zionist terrorism against Hamas and the Qassam brigades." The truce, according to the leaflet, was designed to unite the Palestinian people and reconcile the PA and Hamas. Again, Hamas leaders promised swift and violent reaction if spurned by Israel. Israel rejected the offer, and days later a group of Palestinian gunmen killed three Israeli soldiers.

In October 1997, Israel's release of Shaykh Yassin from prison (following the Khaled Mishal affair) occasioned the next round of Hamas ceasefire declarations. On October 7, Yassin renewed the call for a ceasefire conditioned on Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and West Bank, as well as the evacuation of all Jewish settlements. Despite this announcement, senior Hamas officials vowed to continue their fight against Israel; Hamas's political leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi specifically declared that "Hamas will continue to terrorize all the enemies of God and we will continue in our Jihad and resistance." While some external Hamas leaders such as Musa Abu Marzuq urged Israel to accept such a truce, the Gaza-based Rantisi denied that any truce had been offered to Israel, despite Yassin's public statement. Surprisingly, Yassin complemented his ceasefire message by praising the "blessed suicide bombers' campaign" against Israel in an interview with London's Independent in late October.

In November 1997, Hamas again issued its truce offer. A public statement by Hamas's military wing noted that attacks against Israeli civilians would end if Israel ended attacks on Palestinian civilians. Israeli arrests of militants suspected of perpetrating suicide bombings and other attacks continued throughout the month, and by month's end Shaykh Yassin declared that "the killing will go on."

Eighteen months later, in May 1999, Yassin reissued his ceasefire offer, conditioned on Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders. This call was timed to coincide with the election of Ehud Barak as Israeli prime minister. The offer was rejected by Israel.

Nine months into the al-Aqsa intifada, a June 2001 suicide attack at the Dolphinarium disco in Tel Aviv brought intense international pressure on Palestinian leaders and organizations to end terrorism and violence. Although Shaykh Yassin at first said that Hamas would not honor Arafat's call for a ceasefire, Hamas was soon brought into line, with Rantisi saying the organization had agreed to a temporary ceasefire. The agreement broke down within days, however, when a Hamas activist killed an IDF soldier and mortars rained down on Israeli settlements. Violence continued throughout the summer, punctuated by a Hamas attack in August on a Jerusalem pizzeria, leaving fifteen dead and over ninety wounded.

### Analysis and Implications

In all, nine ceasefires have been declared or offered by Hamas since the beginning of the Oslo process. In some cases, they have followed periods of PA-Hamas confrontation; at other times, they have come on the heels of intensive pressure placed on the PA after particularly egregious acts of terrorism committed by Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups. It is important to note that all ceasefire offers have been presented at a time when Hamas needed "a breather"—a moment to step back and regroup after an organizationally exhausting confrontation with a

more powerful foe (Israel or the PA).

Throughout each of the ceasefires, Hamas leaders continued to support the goals of the original Hamas charter, i.e., the creation, through religiously sanctioned violence, of an Islamic state in all of Palestine. This suggests that past Hamas ceasefires have served as "breathing room," allowing the organization to consolidate its "gains"—be they against the PA or Israel—before undertaking another set of attacks.

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