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Gaza Ceasefire: Crunch Time for the Protagonists and Their Backers

By Amin Saikal

SYNOPSIS

The Gaza ceasefire is faltering, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is determined to wipe out Hamas and US President Donald Trump is keen to turn Gaza into a Middle Eastern Riviera.

COMMENTARY

The first phase of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire that brought some respite to the devastated people of Gaza and segmentally traumatised citizens of Israel, expired last Sunday. A US-driven Israeli proposal that the first phase be extended for another six weeks instead of moving onto the ceasefire's second and third phases, as had originally been agreed, has been rejected by Hamas.

Unless sober heads prevail, this development sets the scene for a resumption of the war, which will cause more suffering for the Gazans and prompt Hamas not to release any more hostages. The main reason for this situation is Hamas' ability to survive Israel's scorched earth military campaign.

The ceasefire agreed in mid-January was to be managed in three phases. The first and second phases were to see the release of some one hundred hostages, alive or dead, in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, as well as a total withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. The third phase was to mark the reconstruction of Gaza. The first phase's length and terms were negotiated beforehand. However, details of the remaining phases were left to be settled consecutively.

Hamas' Survival and Netanyahu's Conundrum

When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially agreed to the ceasefire at the risk

of his far-right coalition government unravelling, he was confident that Israel's fifteen-month-long military operations had disabled Hamas as a fighting force. Thus, he assumed that he had achieved his most avowed goal of destroying Hamas, though without finding or freeing more than a dozen hostages.

Yet, that has not turned out to be the case. During the ceasefire's first phase, Hamas resurfaced as a reasonably coherent, disciplined and equipped militant force or, from the perspective of Israel and its international supporters, a terrorist group. This could not but be deeply troubling for Netanyahu and Israel's main ally, the United States.

Washington had relentlessly backed him during his military campaign politically, diplomatically, and militarily, with the supply of US\$20 billion worth of arms so that he could achieve his goal. It did so in the face of Israel being broadly condemned and isolated, and America being accused of complicity in alleged Israeli "genocidal" actions in response to Hamas' horrifying attacks and kidnappings of October 2023.

Netanyahu's Dilemmas

Netanyahu now faces a quandary. He is under sustained pressure from the families of the remaining hostages to ensure the release of their loved ones on the one hand, and from his own personal and political ambitions and that of extremists in his fragile coalition to resume the war against Hamas on the other. National Security Minister Ben Gvir has already left the coalition and Finance Minister Bezalel Smortrich has threatened to do the same.

While emboldened by the new occupant of the White House, President Donald Trump, as Israel's best friend ever, Netanyahu has taken up a proposal by the president's real estate envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, for an extension of the first phase and immediate release of all remaining hostages rather than progressing into the second phase.

Netanyahu is disinclined to withdraw the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from all of Gaza as a prelude to a permanent ceasefire and is keen to resume fighting to completely eliminate Hamas. To pressure Hamas to concede, he has suspended all humanitarian aid to the Gazans whose survival is dependent on such aid, while incurring more accusations of human rights violations and genocidal actions.

Trump's Plan

A reoccupation of Gaza without Hamas as a governing force, would also open the way for giving reality to the plan aired by President Trump. That plan calls for US ownership of Gaza, the relocation of more than two million Palestinians to neighbouring Egypt, Jordan and beyond, and reconstruction of the enclave, though with investment mostly from other sources than the US government, as a fine piece of real estate on the Mediterranean coast.

Netanyahu and his extremist supporters have welcomed what amounts to Trump's mercantilist imperial proposal. But Cairo, Amman and the Arab League have totally refuted it, and Saudi Arabia has conditioned any normalisation of relations with Israel on the creation of an independent Palestinian state. However, Trump has indicated

that he would leverage America's respective US\$1.8 billion and US\$1.7 billion annual aid packages to Egypt and Jordan to make them comply.

The Arab Plan?

It is now indeed crunch time for both Israel and the Arab states. To avoid a bigger catastrophe in Gaza and regional instability, it is imperative that Israel proceed with the implementation of the ceasefire to the second and third phases. And it is incumbent on the Arab states to persist with the viable, alternative plan for Gaza's reconstruction and governability that they have produced and that doesn't involve the dislocation of the Gazans.

The key points of the 112-page Arab plan, endorsed by a special Arab summit on 5 March, are: rebuilding of Gaza at the cost of US\$53 billion over several years, Hamas ceding power to an interim administration of political independents until a reformed Palestinian Authority can assume control, deployment of a UN peacekeeping force at least during the interim period, and resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict towards the creation of an independent state. The plan regards this process as foundational for regional peace and stability.

However, while Hamas has welcomed the plan, Israel and the US have rejected it as unworkable. Israel has said it does not address "the realities of the situation" and is "rooted in outdated perspectives", and that Israel stands by Trump's proposal. Washington has upheld the sanctity and viability of Donald Trump's plan, stressing that "the president stands by his own vision, which includes expelling the Palestinian residents and transforming it into a 'riviera' owned by the United States".

Meanwhile, in a break from the longstanding policy not to deal directly with Hamas as a "terrorist" entity since 1997, the US special hostage envoy Adam Bohler has, in the last few days, opened, at Trump's instruction, direct talks with the group to broker a deal for the immediate release of the remaining American and Israeli hostages, though without Netanyahu's prior knowledge, as reported by *The Washington Post*.

This marks an important development, but it has been followed by Trump giving a final warning to Hamas to "release all of the hostages now, not later, and immediately return all of the dead bodies of the people you murdered, or it's OVER for you". He has also said that the US has given Israel all the military tools it needs to decimate Hamas. Since the captives are Hamas' only bargaining card, the prospects for their release outside the originally agreed ceasefire do not look bright. Hamas has been quick to reject Trump's ultimatums, saying it will free hostages in return for a lasting ceasefire.

Conclusion

The Trump proposal and the Arab plan have generated a complex scenario, while the people of Gaza continue to experience dehumanising and destitute living. Given that the expulsion of the Strip's inhabitants from their land will be against international law and the two-state solution, the Arab plan must prevail. Any insistence on the Trump plan, along with Israel's desire to annex Gaza as well as the West Bank, must be prevented. Otherwise, the Gaza crisis is set to be the catalyst for more Palestinian suffering and regional instability.

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