Gaza's Ceasefire is Vital, but Insufficient

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What's new? Two years of war in Gaza halted on 9 October as a ceasefire took hold. Pushed by U.S. President Donald Trump, the truce brought huge relief, though initial implementation is rocky. With next steps vague, setting Gaza on a path to long-term peace will require much additional work.

Why does it matter? The truce is meant to be only the first phase implementing a twenty-point plan, but without concerted outside effort the parties could become mired in that phase one. That would leave Palestinians in Gaza trapped in a humanitarian calamity, struggling to survive without hope of recovery.

What should be done? Negotiations about security, governance and reconstruction must continue, with outside powers – especially the U.S. – remaining engaged. Outside powers must both pressure and incentivise Israel and Hamas to hold to the ceasefire, while making progress on the next phase.

I. Overview

On 9 October, in the Egyptian town of Sharm el-Sheikh, Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire and hostage-prisoner release, bringing the first respite in over six months to Palestinians in Gaza and immense relief to Israeli hostages and their families. The truce roughly follows a twenty-point plan presented by U.S. President Donald Trump alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on 29 September. Significant and welcome as it is – even amid a rocky first few days – the truce represents just the first phase of an ambiguous, ambitious and controversial longer term plan, and there is a big risk that progress toward the next steps now stalls indefinitely. While preferable to resumed war, this scenario could entrench Israel's presence and control in Gaza, normalise bare Palestinian survival without recovery, and promote a Palestinian exodus from such miserable conditions. Better outcomes are possible, but

they require sustained engagement from regional and European powers, and most importantly the United States.

The Gaza truce forms part of a broader deal that comprises two near-term phases and limns a far-off political horizon. The first phase established a ceasefire with all military operations suspended; an exchange of all 48 remaining Israeli hostages, twenty living and 28 dead, for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners and detainees along with some 500 dead; Israeli troop withdrawal from about 43 per cent of Gaza, occupying the rest, including the Rafah border crossing, until further conditions are met; and the entry of about 600 aid trucks per day to the strip's uprooted and starving population. The second phase mainly concerns Hamas's future as an armed group, but also sketches out arrangements for security, governance, reconstruction and economic development in Gaza.

World leaders embraced the plan, impatient to see the war end and encouraged by Trump's evident eagerness to see the deal carried out swiftly. A collective sigh of exhaustion and relief resounded as the bombardment stopped, captives were released and life-saving aid began moving into Gaza. The first few days have also seen a number of incidents that have tested the truce, with both sides exchanging accusations of non-compliance amid ongoing lethal violence. Both parties nonetheless say that they remain committed to the truce.

For all the hope it engendered, the ceasefire is not necessarily the end of the Gaza war that Trump proclaims it to be, much less a blueprint for Middle East peace. The terms are ambiguous by necessity, a reflection of positions that could not be reconciled and that had scuppered previous rounds of negotiations. Rather than force clarity that would have collapsed negotiations yet again, mediators crafted language each side could interpret favourably – or, for the time being, ignore altogether. The deal deliberately deferred questions of how Hamas will be disarmed, when Israeli troops will fully withdraw, who will govern and secure Gaza, who will rebuild it and how. These questions appear as intractable as ever, and they will only grow more difficult if the external pressure that created the ceasefire recedes.

The problems with the Trump plan go deeper still. It glaringly lacks Palestinian political input. It makes no mention of Gaza's connection to the West Bank, where the Israeli government continues to lead an annexationist policy, buttressed by Israeli military and settler violence. It leaves Israel in control of over half of Gaza and Hamas in effect holding the rest, while desperately needed aid remains subject to Israeli discretion. It stipulates vague political and security arrangements that will take months or years to negotiate, requiring sustained attention and expertise from a U.S. administration not known for either.

The imperative to consolidate and preserve the present truce is obvious; here pressure by U.S. and regional mediators involved in the deal will continue to be crucial but stepping up aid deliveries and deploying international monitors could also help. (Senior U.S. officials have reportedly deployed to Israel this week to press leaders there not to resume an assault on the strip.) Yet in focusing on preventing a return to the horrific violence of the last two years, the deal's sponsors must not overlook another danger. A prolonged phase one, while better than returning to armed conflict, could trap Gaza in a humanitarian purgatory and spawn a political catastrophe of its own. Under such a scenario, Gaza would remain divided and destitute, with half of its territory under direct Israeli control, with aid agencies providing limited support while Hamas rules over the rest. The scenario is not far-fetched. As some Arab officials have told Crisis Group, parts of the plan's second phase could in practice prove impossible to achieve, and so carry the risk that the current "temporary" arrangements could get stuck, becoming less a way station on the road to a permanent settlement than the settlement itself.

But for all the risks, Washington's plan is currently the only diplomatic framework with nominal buy-in from the two warring parties, as well as from all the key regional states and from Europe. The challenge now is to keep the momentum going with continued positive engagement by all sides. The plan's twenty points should not be viewed as a rigid contract – indeed, they cannot be, given their ambiguity and lack of detail. Instead, the governments most concerned should regard them as a means of both keeping Trump invested in a permanent ceasefire and averting renewed catastrophe – by preventing the war's resumption, cementing incremental progress toward viable governance and security arrangements, and pressing the parties to wrestle with the fundamental questions that remain unresolved. While the parties have yielded to U.S. and other outside pressure for the time being, they also face internal pressures and redlines that could either push them back to war or keep them from making peace. It will take very attentive diplomacy and a deft wielding of carrots and sticks to surmount these obstacles.

The choice is stark: renewed violence and indefinite humanitarian disaster, or the painstaking work of transforming an ambiguous ceasefire into something more durable. After two years of war and well over 70,000 killed, with Israel exhausted at home and condemned abroad, and with Gaza rendered virtually unliveable, the crying need was to silence the guns. But the formula of maintaining that calm even while pushing for progress on security, governance and reconstruction – and also holding Israel to account for aggressive West Bank policies that could derail progress in Gaza – represents the best insurance against locking the strip into permanent catastrophe and perpetuating further violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

II. A Fragile Alignment

The Trump plan did not emerge from a vacuum. It builds upon the terms of previous ceasefire talks, as well as U.S. consultations with key Arab and Muslim leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in mid-September, and with the Israeli premier in Washington the following week. That said, the ceasefire deal was sealed not as a result of consensus building but from Trump's pressure on the mediators to bridge unbridgeable positions, which explains both the agreement's achievement and its fragility.

The immediate catalyst for the deal was Israel's 9 September 2025 airstrike on Hamas negotiators meeting in Doha. The botched assassination infuriated Qatar and other Gulf countries, prompting them to unite their diplomatic leverage with Egypt and Türkiye, and to jointly make the case to Trump that the costs of Israel's metastasising campaign were both unbearable for people in the region and inimical to U.S. interests. In Middle East capitals, Israeli diplomats were told to forget about friendship or normalisation until the killing and starving of Palestinians stopped.

For their part, Hamas leaders roaming from Doha to Cairo and Istanbul were quietly warned that time was running out – they could swallow unpalatable ceasefire terms or relocate to less pleasant places of exile.[1] Battered by Israel's brutal offensive on Gaza City since late August, Hamas feared that Trump might greenlight Gaza's total erasure.[2] A critical mass within Hamas also appears to have been convinced that the hostages had become a strategic liability – providing neither Gaza nor the group with protection, while solidifying an otherwise divided Israeli home front and helping Israel to justify its campaign.[3]

The longstanding gaps between the parties' positions were as big as ever. Hamas sought guarantees of a permanent ceasefire; Israel vowed to continue the war until Hamas, or at least its military and governance capacities, were eliminated. Arab states demanded full Israeli withdrawal and a clear path to Palestinian statehood; Netanyahu rejected any role for the Palestinian Authority and bristled at mention of statehood. Hamas insisted it would only surrender weapons to a Palestinian state; Israel demanded immediate disarmament.

Over several intensive days, U.S. negotiators set aside some previous demands and synthesised multiple proposals into a framework that sidestepped these contradictions through ambiguity and postpone-

[1] Crisis Group interview, Palestinian analyst, Doha, August 2025.
[2] Crisis Group interview, Arab official, September 2025; Jason Burke, "Trump gives Hamas 'three or four days' to respond to his peace plan for Gaza", *The Guardian*, 30 September 2025.
[3] Crisis Group interview, Arab journalist, Doha, October 2025.

ment rather than resolution. Israel would withdraw "progressively" based on undefined parameters; "demilitarisation" would mean weapons placed "permanently beyond use" without specifying what that entails or the implications for military infrastructure; the "pathway" for Palestinian self-determination remains aspirational, dependent on undefined "conditions"; governance would rest with a "technocratic, apolitical Palestinian committee" under international oversight, deferring PA involvement until it reforms.[4]

Before the plan's unveiling, Arab leaders discovered that the version they had agreed to and presented to Hamas had been further altered in marathon sessions between Israeli and U.S. negotiators, and so pleaded with Washington to delay the announcement.[5] Trump ignored them and went ahead anyway.[6] The lopsided outcome was perhaps inevitable. With Washington and Jerusalem narrowing differences, and Arab states reluctant to walk away, the final text reflected the prevailing balance of power.

That said, although the deal leans heavily in Israel's favour, Netanyahu did not get everything he wanted. He was forced to end a war which he had relied on as a means of political survival: Trump, who let Witkoff and Kushner ignore Israeli qualms and negotiate directly with the Hamas leadership, insisted on a ceasefire and made clear that he meant it.[7] The prime minister had to swallow provisions that touched on the possible return of the Palestinian Authority and the prospect of Palestinian statehood. Trump also forced Netanyahu to apologise directly to Qatar for the 9 September Doha strike, which also killed a Qatari security officer, and choreographed a call from the Oval Office to that end, pictures of which were distributed to the media.[8]

Pressure on Israel also came from other crucial sources. Some of Israel's oldest allies – France, the UK, Canada, Australia – had lodged strenuous objections to its Gaza offensive for months, with some formally recognising Palestine in September to underline their displeasure. Italy's Giorgia Meloni, under pressure from nationwide protests that brought the country to a standstill, began showing willingness to support some sanctions against Israel, which could have broken the EU's gridlock around taking more punitive measures to try

[4] "Trump's 20-point Gaza peace plan in full", BBC, 9 October 2025.
[5] Crisis Group communication with political adviser, September 2025; Jacob Magid, "Netanyahu secured key edits to Trump plan, slowing and limiting IDF's Gaza withdrawal", *Times of Israel*, 30 September 2025.
[6] Andrew England, Neri Zilber and Abigail Hauslohner, "How Donald Trump's Gaza deal came together", *Financial Times*, 30 September 2025.
[7] Barak Ravid, "Direct meeting between Trump envoys and Hamas leaders sealed Gaza deal", Axios, 13 October 2025.
[8] Jacob Magid, Lazar Berman and Toi Staff, "Netanyahu Apologizes to Qatar for Violating its Territory with Strike on Hamas Chiefs", *Times of Israel*, 29 September 2025.

stopping the war.[9] Germany, Israel's staunchest protector in the EU, was finding its stance increasingly untenable as polls showed a majority of the German public, like many in Europe, believed Israel was committing genocide in Gaza and that Germany should take stronger actions against it; Berlin's own ambassador to Tel Aviv warned that "the ground is moving" under their countries' friendship.[10] Netanyahu's government is wont to belittle international opinion, asserting the country can go it alone, but Israeli officials were hardly blind to the shift in global attitudes. Nor was it lost on Trump, who told Netanyahu that Israel cannot fight the whole world.[11]

To be sure, Hamas also needed to be corralled by Washington. Trump quickly accepted a response to his proposal from the group that was at best ambiguous as a sign its leaders were ready to move ahead. That was enough for the ceasefire to take hold – at least for now.

III. Facing Core Incompatibilities

The ceasefire's first phase has largely held despite continued violence. The deliverables for each party are tangible and defined, while its ambiguity allows all parties to say they have won something important without resolving core incompatibilities. By recovering the hostages while keeping troops in most of Gaza, Netanyahu can both claim victory and retain freedom of operation inside the strip. Hamas, after enduring two years of existential threat to itself and Gaza writ large, can claim it received explicit U.S. guarantees to end the war, freed nearly 2,000 Palestinians, forced the Israeli army to withdraw from the strip's central districts and to ease its near-total blockade and allow in aid. Arab and Muslim leaders hope to have quieted the anger that was inflaming their domestic publics, and won public assurances that there will be no mass expulsion of Palestinians; some also won closer military support from the U.S., such as a pledge to defend Qatar and the possibility of high tech hardware for Türkiye.[12] Trump, for his part, did not win the Nobel Peace Prize that he reportedly covets, but did score a major foreign policy triumph, acknowledged on camera by dozens of world leaders.

[9] Michael Horovitz, "Meloni tells UN Italy will back some EU sanctions on Israel, war has 'crossed the line'", *Times of Israel*, 25 September 2025.
[10] Tweet by Steffen Seibert, @GerAmbTLV, German ambassador to Israel, 3:34pm, 17 September 2025; "It became clear early in 2024 that the war was endless", Crisis Group interview with European diplomat, Tel Aviv, 28 September 2025.
[11] Joseph Krauss, Aamer Hadhani and Matthew Lee, "Trump gets long-sought Gaza hostage deal with a whole lot of help from Arab and Muslim allies", AP, 10 October 2025.
[12] Steve Trimble, "Reviving Banned Turkey F-35 Deal Is 'Easily' Done, Trump Says", Aviation Week, 25 September 2025; see also "Assuring the security of the state of Qatar", Executive Order, The White House, 29 September 2025.

But the road to the next phase is set to get more arduous, as it will require keeping a lid on tensions that could cause the truce's collapse, at the same time as negotiators explore ways to get clarity on the questions that the first phase's ambiguity elides.

A. *A Rocky First Week*

The ceasefire's first week illustrated these challenges. Israeli officials accused Hamas of dragging its feet in returning several dead hostages. Dozens of Palestinians, including children, have reportedly been killed by Israeli forces while approaching or crossing the "yellow line" where Israeli troops have withdrawn – a delineation that in many places has no clear markers for people on the ground. On 19 October, two Israeli soldiers were killed in an incident that remains murky: Israel claimed Hamas fighters attacked its troops in Rafah, a destroyed city which is behind the yellow line though reports suggested Israeli troops encountered an unexploded ordnance.[13] Israel responded hours later with what it called a "massive wave of strikes" across Gaza.[14] Israel then announced a return to the ceasefire. Both sides publicly reaffirmed their commitment to the truce.

While aid flows were slow to resume, initially undermining the ceasefire from another direction, that situation has improved. The Israeli government has sporadically ordered Gaza's crossings to be closed, alleging Hamas breaches in the terms of the hostage release. The UN reported that only 339 humanitarian aid trucks were offloaded for distribution in the first week, far short of the 600 daily trucks stipulated in the agreement.[15] These numbers have now risen to hundreds a day, and include vital fuel and medical supplies, though some basic goods such as shoes and fresh vegetables are still lacking.[16]

These incidents and shortfalls have exposed a deeper problem for the ceasefire: its terms are being negotiated in practice rather than on paper. The deal calls for international monitors, and reports indicate 200 U.S. forces plus other contingents are deploying, but their role – what they will actually do, where they can go, what authority they have – remains unclear. Israeli officials privately indicate they want arrangements similar to the Lebanon ceasefire, which preserves Israel's ability to strike when it perceives threats.[17] Hamas for its part

[13] Andrew Day, "Amid Israeli Attacks, White House Official Denies Hamas Violated Ceasefire", The American Conservative, 20 October 2025.
[14] Lorenzo Tondo, "Israel has violated ceasefire 47 times and killed 38 Palestinians, says Gaza media office", *The Guardian*, 18 October 2025. Ivana Kottasová, Ibrahim Dahman, Eyad Kourdi, "Masked Hamas fighters seen executing men in Gaza City as the group fights with rival power", CNN, 15 October 2025.
[15] "Gaza Humanitarian Response Update | 28 September - 11 October 2025", United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 15 October 2025.
[16] "'We're turning the tide on Gaza starvation crisis' - UN aid chief", video, BBC, 18 October 2025.
[17] Crisis Group phone interview, 25 September 2025.

is unlikely to halt all activity by fighters or affiliated groups, particularly as relates to internal security. Without visible progress, both sides will be hard pressed to justify restraint to their own constituencies. Success depends less on eliminating all friction than on establishing workable rules that keep incidents contained, ensure rapid de-escalation and prevent any single flare-up from unravelling the arrangement entirely.

B. *Security and Demilitarisation*

Historically, unless one side triumphs militarily in a conflict, successful demilitarisation requires a political framework that gives armed groups at least some confidence that their core interests can be secured without weapons – a horizon the Trump plan fails to provide Hamas. Still, Hamas has intimated that it might surrender remaining "offensive" armaments such as rockets, launching systems and anti-tank weapons (much of which have already been destroyed).[18] Additionally, Israeli officials have acknowledged to Crisis Group that complete removal of small arms, given their prevalence in Gaza, is infeasible.[19] Theoretically, then, there may be space to find common ground on weapons that Hamas can accept and that Israel can portray as the group's effective disarmament.

Gaza's tunnels are another matter. The underground network enables movement, resupply and protection for its remaining leadership and fighters. Israel raced to destroy as many tunnels as possible in the war's final days and demands elimination of the rest. The movement might agree to neutralise some tunnels to extend the truce, or possibly to reveal their locations to a neutral party, but it is unlikely to agree to their comprehensive elimination.

The Trump plan envisions an International Stabilisation Force (ISF) deploying immediately to Gaza, training local Palestinian police and coordinating with Jordan and Egypt on border security while providing what the plan calls "the long-term internal security solution".[20] The force's precise composition and mandate are undefined, but it might feasibly offer some tripwire against a return to war and, in theory, a minimal degree of protection for Palestinians that goes beyond diplomatic pressure.

Whether any of this will come to pass remains unclear. Hamas's written response to the plan made no mention of the ISF, though in subsequent public statements, Hamas officials have rejected the idea of foreign forces, including from Arab or Muslim countries,

[18] Mat Nashed, "Will Hamas agree to hand over its weapons as part of a Gaza ceasefire deal?", Al Jazeera, 9 October 2025.
[19] Crisis Group phone interview, 25 September 2025.
[20] "Trump's 20-point Gaza Peace Plan in Full", op. cit.

operating with independent authority.[21] Preparations for such a force appear to be in the very early stages, with no countries yet pledging troops – aside from a vague promise from Indonesia and the arrival in Israel of an advance U.S. contingent that is projected to include 200 members and is probably destined for oversight and command functions rather than as "boots on the ground".[22] Some potential troop contributors (including Indonesia and Azerbaijan) are likely to require the UN Security Council's blessing. Even then, none are likely to commit troops to take on Hamas on Israel's behalf or, for that matter, stand in the firing line if Israel is determined to strike Gaza again. For a foreign force to function inside Gaza without provoking violent resistance, it will need to coordinate – however quietly or indirectly – with the very Hamas authorities it is nominally supposed to replace. Success, if it comes, will depend on Hamas's tacit cooperation and Israel's acquiescence – which in turn depends on both parties calculating that accommodation serves their interests better than confrontation. Whether such a calculation can be sustained over months or years remains deeply uncertain.

Meanwhile, in the immediate security vacuum, Hamas moved quickly to impose control and some semblance of order. Its forces launched a brutal crackdown on clans and smaller armed groups that it claimed were involved in looting and criminal activities or that it accused of collaborating with Israel, seizing large weapons and aid stockpiles.[23] Its methods have ranged from soliciting cooperation from other major clans to grisly public executions.[24] How much Hamas will restore its internal security dominance and for how long Israel will tolerate it doing so remain as uncertain as the group's willingness to decommission its arms.

C. *Governance*

If demilitarisation and security pose severe practical challenges, governance may be even harder to resolve. The plan envisions a two-tier structure: day-to-day administration by a committee of Palestinian technocrats, with oversight vested in an international "Board of Peace" chaired by Trump himself.[25] The rationale for what resembles, in effect, an ugly colonial construct appears to be that, on one hand, Israeli governance of the strip is out of the question, and yet on the

[21] Cara Anna and Samy Magdy, "What to know as key talks to end the war in Gaza begin", AP, 7 October 2025.
[22] Emma DeRuiter, "US troops begin arriving in Israel to oversee ceasefire implementation in Gaza", Euronews, 11 October 2025.
[23] Nidal Al-Mughrabi, "Hamas carries out wave of Gaza killings, citing crime and security concerns", Reuters, 13 October 2025.
[24] Martin Kear, "Hamas is battling powerful clans for control in Gaza – who are these groups and what threat do they pose?", The Conversation, 15 October 2025.
[25] "Trump's 20-point Gaza Peace Plan in Full", op. cit.

other hand Israel suspects that any Palestinian body, even if not formally including Hamas, will be under the group's influence.

Here the prevailing power dynamics are once again at play. Despite the widely held view that Gaza should become part of a Palestinian state – which more world leaders formally recognised at the UN last month – Israel, with U.S. cover, carries an effective veto against its realisation on the ground. The Netanyahu government has explicitly sought to block the Palestinian Authority (PA), which runs Palestinian populated areas in the West Bank, from future governance arrangements in Gaza; it sees the long-term separation of the occupied territories as an effective means to splinter the Palestinian national movement and to forestall Palestinian statehood.[26] The Trump plan includes a single vague reference to the "aspiration" of Palestinian self-determination and statehood. Arab and European governments have construed this language as tacit U.S. support for the two-state solution, but while it goes further than the Israelis would have liked, U.S. officials have already indicated that their horizon for achieving this is indefinitely long.[27]

For all these reasons, accepting a governance mandate under the Trump plan would be deeply damaging for any Palestinian faction. To this day, Fatah's acquiescence to running the PA as per the 1993-1995 Oslo Accords has depleted its public legitimacy and led many to label it as a "subcontractor" to Israel's occupation. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine immediately rejected "foreign guardianship", insisting that governance is an "internal Palestinian matter".[28]

Yet for all these flaws, it would be better to try to work creatively with the 20-point plan's governance arrangements – such as they are – than to treat them as dead on arrival. The technocratic committee could be workable. As part of internal reconciliation talks last year, Palestinian factions reached tentative terms on the formation of such a body, though President Mahmoud Abbas stalled its implementation. Building off of its Arab League-endorsed reconstruction plan for Gaza in March, Egypt has announced that fifteen members have been confirmed for the committee, claiming they have already been vetted and approved by all parties.[29]

[26] "Talking about a Palestinian state is a non-starter, and only plays into Hamas's hands; there is a big gap between how the political echelon sees the PA and how the world does." Crisis Group interview with Israeli official, Tel Aviv, 11 August 2025.
[27] Max Rego, "Rubio Says a Palestinian state 'not even a realistic thing right now'", *The Hill*, 5 October 2025.
[28] "Hamas, Palestinian factions reject any 'foreign guardianship' over Gaza", Reuters, 10 October 2025.
[29] "Egypt says Israel and Hamas approved Palestinian team tapped to oversee post-war Gaza", *Times of Israel*, 20 October 2025.

The Board of Peace is another matter. Ostensibly, it would hold not just overarching purview for governance of the strip but control over reconstruction funds, security affairs and strategic decisions, effectively subordinating Palestinian administrators – and Gaza's two million Palestinians – to an external body led by the U.S. president and possibly staffed by figures closely aligned with Israel. The upside is that Trump's chairmanship of the Board potentially offers a way to keep him invested in a situation that could quickly unspool if Washington loses interest. The downsides, however, are the untenability of placing Gaza under indefinite international receivership and the reality that it may subject Gaza to the whims of a leader whose track record offers Palestinians little reason for confidence.

One option might maintain deliberate gaps between formal authority and operational reality. For example, the Board – which should have much stronger Palestinian representation than currently envisaged – could meet periodically, focus on headline issues and major reconstruction contracts, and provide the oversight Israel and foreign donors require. The Palestinian committee would operate daily, making hundreds of decisions that accumulate into practical autonomy, managing services and local governance without Board interference. Alternatively, with precise roles and responsibilities still to be negotiated, the Board could focus on what its name suggests: preparations for negotiating a durable, more highly articulated peace deal rather than the day-to-day governance of Gaza – more Group of Friends than governing authority. One way or the other, winning Trump's buy-in for such arrangements will require much greater coordination and unity among the Palestinian factions as well as Arab and European states.

Even under this vision, governance would operate within constraints that Israel still effectively controls. Whether its suffocating blockade lifts, whether dual-use restrictions ease enough to permit reconstruction at speed and at scale, whether forces fully withdraw from agricultural lands, from Gaza's fisheries and areas near the perimeter, whether military strikes resume – these Israeli decisions will determine whether any Palestinian governing structure, however carefully calibrated, can actually deliver recovery. The gaps that make governance theoretically workable may prove irrelevant if Israel strangles progress at will.

D. *The Danger of a Permanent Phase One*

The risk that Gaza now faces is that predictable clashes over security and governance not only slow the roll-out of the next phase but make it unachievable. One possible result is that the first phase simply lingers on. The challenge is to keep it dynamic, allowing incremental progress to prevent collapse into catastrophe. Incrementalism is a dirty word in both Israel and Palestine, and understandably so given

the failures of the Oslo Accords. Yet it seems unthinkable for now that both sides might agree up front to much beyond temporary arrangements. What matters most in the immediate term is locking in humanitarian gains – sustaining the pause in violence, maintaining massive aid flows, advancing rapid reconstruction – while using ongoing negotiations to keep the parties diplomatically entangled rather than militarily confronting each other.

If no progress is possible, phase one could too easily calcify into something that is fundamentally inhumane and over time dangerous. Gaza's population could remain trapped amid rubble and unexploded ordnance, crammed into less than half of what was already among the world's most densely populated territories, surviving on rations that prevent starvation but preclude recovery. Those who have the means to leave might begin to do so in greater numbers, induced by abominable living conditions and with serious consequences for the conflict and the region.

If negotiations stall entirely, another scenario is that the Trump plan's fallback mechanism could end up formalising Gaza's partition. Implementation would proceed in areas under Israeli or international control. Israel could accelerate aid flows and reconstruction in these zones, protect families and armed groups facing pressure from Hamas, and establish local governance. This would effectively divide Gaza between an internationally backed "model" zone and the desperate Hamas-controlled enclave. The risk is not merely humanitarian: partition would further fragment Palestinians while creating new flashpoints along internal boundaries. Instead of resolving the conflict, it could create a different one.

IV. How to Maintain Momentum

The freezing of phase one is not inevitable, however. Phase two negotiations are already underway. Sustained, coordinated pressure from capitals worldwide will be needed to keep the ceasefire intact (as the Trump administration appears to recognise with its deployment of senior officials to Israel this week) and to steer negotiators toward pragmatic arrangements that avert the worst outcomes.[30] Crafting such arrangements will be key, since, by itself, external pressure has its limits. Neither Israel nor Hamas wants to offend Trump, but their interests in Gaza are greater than anyone else's. However over-

[30] The New York Times reports that U.S. officials are "increasingly concerned that Benjamin Netanyahu … could dismantle the U.S. brokered agreement" and that Vice President JD Vance is joining Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner in Israel as part of an effort to try to hold the deal together. Katie Rogers and Luke Broadwater, "White House Works to Preserve Gaza Deal Amid Concerns About Netanyahu", *The New York Times*, 20 October 2025.

whelming outside power can be, local actors will not buckle to what they consider existential threats. Israel will not withdraw from the expanded buffer zone or relinquish total control over Gaza's borders without confidence that Hamas or other hostile groups will not re-emerge. Hamas will not surrender what remains of its military capacity without a political framework guaranteeing its own survival and Gaza's security. Avoiding a stalemate will therefore require policies that give the warring parties and other actors incentives to stay engaged.

As concerns consolidating the current truce, some quiet practical measures have already been taken that could help. Aid flows appear to have shifted into higher gear, approaching the required 600 trucks a day. Prices of basic foodstuffs in Gaza have plunged.[31] Delivery is now exclusively through the tried and tested UN-managed system that prevailed until Israel imposed a complete siege from 2 March – 18 May. As noted above, certain basics are still not making it to needy Palestinians; the sooner this can be addressed the better. Meantime, the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, a controversial Israeli-American initiative to distribute food at "secure" remote locations, which exposed Palestinians to deadly IDF fire, suspended operations on 10 October.[32]

Another potential contribution to calming the situation is the deployment in Israel of an advance contingent of U.S. troops and other foreign military advisors. They will not directly interfere in clashes, but may be in a position to deconflict tensions. The fog around the above-referenced incident at Rafah on 19 October underscored the utility of gaining neutral information (see Section III.A). Outside observers with adequate intelligence-gathering and liaison capacity might have been able to prevent the escalation.

Looking further out at phase two, three sets of actors could shape carrots and sticks that encourage continued progress by the parties. First, regional powers should leverage existing normalisation or its prospects, including its trade and other benefits, to keep Israel and the U.S. engaged by promising to "lock in" a wider peace and extend Trump's diplomatic legacy. This strategy faces a sequencing dilemma. Netanyahu, entering an election year, may value deals with Saudi Arabia or Indonesia and long-term security arrangements with Syria or Lebanon. Normalisation may appeal as Israelis feel their growing isolation. Arab and other Muslim states could condition such arrangements on phase two progress – advancing governance and security arrangements, enabling genuine reconstruction, moving down the "pathway" to Palestinian statehood as outlined by the French-Saudi

[31] Crisis Group interviews with Gaza families, October 2025.
[32] Kevin Nguyen, Phil Leake and Merlyn Thomas, "Aid group suspends Gaza operations after ceasefire", BBC, 16 October 2025.

initiative and reflected in the New York Declaration.[33] Importantly, they must preserve some leverage for battles beyond Gaza, including relief of the West Bank from crushing Israeli restrictions, as well as the threat of annexation. Maintaining coordination will require resisting bilateral deals – or U.S. pressure to make them – that allow Israel to pocket gains without reciprocal commitments.

Keeping Hamas engaged requires a different mix of pressure and inducements. Trump's direct threats carry less weight with Hamas than does the risk that abandoning negotiations would cost the group its Arab protection, potentially allowing Trump to greenlight Israel's return to war. Qatar, Turkey and Egypt must sustain their coordinated message: Hamas's survival depends on diplomatic participation, and foot dragging means losing the umbrella currently constraining Israel's campaign. Yet pressure alone won't suffice. Hamas must see tangible gains – increased aid and goods entering Gaza, ceasefire violations kept to a bare minimum, some reconstruction beginning, its organisational survival not immediately threatened – in exchange for flexibility on demilitarisation, accepting the ISF and ceding governmental authority. Without this balance, Hamas may judge that resuming fighting or spoiling further progress, which would further isolate Israel internationally and keep global attention on Gaza's devastation, offers more than an ambiguous diplomatic process yielding no meaningful concessions or security guarantees.

Secondly, a combination of European pressure on Israel and contributions to the furtherance of the twenty-point plan could help shift Israeli calculations, promote reconstruction and prevent backsliding. The EU should keep pressure on the table. Possible measures might include suspension of trade benefits under the EU-Israel Association Agreement, a freeze on research cooperation, or targeted sanctions against institutions and individuals involved in illegal settlement of the West Bank, all measures which were already tabled as part of growing efforts to end the Gaza war. Yet the EU Foreign Affairs Council, whose member states remain divided, shelved discussions of trade measures within days of the ceasefire announcement (it is still on the European Commission's agenda).[34] Such pressure would need to be calibrated – severe enough to matter, targeted enough to avoid backlash, coordinated enough across EU members to demonstrate unity and economic impact. If the possibility of such measures can be sustained through phase two negotiations, it could help make stalemate costlier than compromise.

[33] "United Nations High-Level International Conference – New York Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State solution", Permanent mission of France to the United Nations in New York, 29 July 2025.
[34] Gerardo Fortuna, "Commission hints at change to Israel sanctions plan if Gaza ceasefire holds", Politico, 13 October 2025.

The EU can also contribute to progress on the twenty-point plan by encouraging the U.S. to keep its attention on the strip, and by using their relationships with the Israeli government to push for humanitarian aid delivery at speed and scale to above pre-7 October levels, including through Rafah, where the EU is planning to redeploy its border monitoring mission. The ISF could also benefit from the EU's experience in training Palestinian police in the West Bank and its funding for de-mining. Longer-term, the EU foresees space to address risks of renewed violence through support for recovery, reconstruction and reconciliation projects.[35]

Thirdly, sustained U.S. engagement remains the critical variable. Trump has demonstrated that he can force movement. His administration should treat phase two with the same intensity as the first. This means daily oversight of implementation details using the full toolbox of U.S. leverage – security support for Arab partners, weapons supplies to Israel, diplomatic cover at the UN – to motivate progress. Senior officials would need to resist the inevitable pressure to declare victory and move on. Trump himself would need to maintain his personal commitment now that his own credibility is invested in the plan. At the same time, the U.S. must be pragmatic about what constitutes acceptable outcomes. This likely means recognising that Hamas will not fully disarm any time soon, that Palestinian governance will work through managed ambiguity, and that reconstruction must begin incrementally, with the necessary materials entering Gaza and rebuilding proceeding even without comprehensive implementation of the security and governance agendas.

The precedents for the Trump administration so far are mixed. The January ceasefire succeeded with few hitches for 42 days, but then the U.S. abruptly allowed Israel to breach the deal. The administration is not known for sustained focus on the complexities of diplomatic implementation. The Sharm el-Sheikh summit suggested a focus on grand gesture and broad regional architecture rather than on the details of implementation. Yet Trump has also shown that when he does concentrate his energies, he can crack heads together and create irresistible diplomatic momentum. Unique among recent U.S. presidents, he enjoys considerable political latitude in handling Israel, having built good will among Israelis while wielding enormous influence over his own domestic base. He has also displayed a willingness to break with Netanyahu at various junctures and press him into compromises. Whether he can get through the grinding work of phase two, or whether the victory lap of hostage returns and lavish conferences will satisfy his appetite for achievement, remains to be seen.

[35] Jacopo Barigazzi and Gabriel Gavin, "EU's Israel plan: Protect Palestinian statehood in talks with Trump", Politico, 17 October 2025.

V. Conclusion

The Gaza truce could not be more welcome. After two years of war and well over 70,000 killed, with Israel exhausted at home and condemned abroad, and with Gaza rendered virtually unliveable, forcing an end to Israel's assault was the priority. Consolidating that truce amid allegations of breaches on both sides and flares of violence is an immediate need, but beyond that a new challenge looms. Those who want Gaza to have a brighter future, rather than one that sinks into permanent catastrophe, need to make sure momentum continues beyond the barebones ceasefire that has been established and toward something more enduring. Maintaining the peace while simultaneously enabling progress on security, governance and reconstruction – however challenging – is the only way to do that.

The hard truth is that the negotiations ahead are unlikely to achieve their stated aims. Progress, if it comes, will most likely emerge through compromise and improvisation that allow life to improve incrementally even as fundamental questions remain unresolved. Whether Gaza becomes a site of creative diplomacy and rehabilitation or an endless humanitarian crisis will depend on actors whose attention is already fragmenting and whose interests diverge. They should not lose their focus on the strip and its people. Trump's ceasefire has created space. The question now is whether that space is used to build something more durable or simply marks a pause before either a return to war or a permanent crisis that more slowly but just as surely consumes Gaza's population and society, while further unsettling a volatile region.

Tel Aviv/Cairo/New York/Brussels, 21 October 2025

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Complex Risk Analytics Fund (CRAF'd), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, DG INTPA), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (French Development Agency), Germany (Federal Foreign Office), International Organization for Migration, Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Japan (Japan External Trade Organization), Latvia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), Malta (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), , Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Republic of Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Slovenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations World Food Programme, and the World Bank.

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October 2025

Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2022

Special Reports and Briefings

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023 (also available in French).

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025, Special Briefing N°12, 10 September 2024 (also available in French).

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025-2026, Special Briefing N°13, 9 September 2025 (also available in French).

Eastern Mediterranean

Rethinking Gas Diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East Report N°240, 26 April 2023 (also available in Arabic).

Israel/Palestine

The Israeli Government's Old-New Palestine Strategy, Middle East Briefing N°86, 28 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Realigning European Policy toward Palestine with Ground Realities, Middle East Report N°237, 23 August 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Managing Palestine's Looming Leadership Transition, Middle East Report N°238, 1 February 2023 (also available in Arabic).

UNRWA's Reckoning: Preserving the UN Agency Serving Palestinian Refugees, Middle East Report N°242, 15 September 2023 (also available in Arabic).

A Way Out for Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°90, 9 December 2023 (also available in Arabic).

Stopping Famine in Gaza, Middle East Report N°244, 8 April 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Stemming Israeli Settler Violence at Its Root, Middle East Report N°246, 6 September 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Sovereignty in All but Name: Israel's Quickening Annexation of the West Bank, Middle East Report N°252, 9 October 2025 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins, Middle East Report N°234, 9 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar, Middle East Report N°235, 31 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria, Middle East Report N°236, 18 July 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Limiting the Damage of Lebanon's Looming Presidential Vacuum, Middle East Briefing N°88, 27 October 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West, Middle East Report N°239, 7 March 2023 (also available in Arabic).

Containing Domestic Tensions in War-hit Lebanon, Middle East Briefing N°94, 27 February 2025 (also available in Arabic).

The New Syria: Halting a Dangerous Drift, Middle East Briefing N°95, 28 March 2025 (also available in Arabic).

Supporting Effective Policing by Lebanon's Embattled Security Agencies, Middle East Report N°251, 27 August 2025 (also available in Arabic)..

North Africa

Steering Libya Past Another Perilous Crossroads, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°85, 18 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Saïed's Tunisia: Promoting Dialogue and Fixing the Economy to Ease Tensions, Middle East and North Africa Report N°232, 6 April 2022 (also available in French).

Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace, Middle East and North Africa Report N°243, 22 December 2023 (also available in Arabic).

Egypt's Gaza Dilemmas, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°91, 16 May 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Getting Past Libya's Central Bank Standoff, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°93, 1 October 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Managing Tensions between Algeria and Morocco, Middle East and North Africa Report N°247, 29 November 2024 (also available in Arabic and French).

Frozen Billions: Reforming Sanctions on the Libyan Investment Authority, Middle East and North Africa Report N°249, 24 April 2025 (also available in Arabic).

A Window for Diplomacy in Western Sahara, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°96, 20 October 2025.

Iran/Yemen/Gulf

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Six: Now or Never, Middle East Report N°230, 17 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict, Middle East Report N°231, 20 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives, Middle East Report N°233, 29 April 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible? Middle East Briefing N°87, 12 September 2022 (also available in Farsi).

How Huthi-Saudi Negotiations Will Make or Break Yemen, Middle East Briefing N°89, 29 December 2022 (also available in Arabic).

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Great Expectations: The Future of Iranian-Saudi Détente, Middle East Briefing N°92, 13 June 2024.

Man on a Wire: A Way Forward for Iran's New President, Middle East Report N°245, 30 July 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Calming the Red Sea's Turbulent Waters, Middle East Report N°248, 21 March 2025 (also available in Arabic).

Grievance and Flawed Governance in Iran's Baluchestan, Middle East Report N°250, 19 August 2025 (also available in Arabic).

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