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GAZA: back to status quo

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As Ban Ki-moon **said**, “any peace effort that does not tackle the root causes of the crisis will do little more than set the stage for the next cycle of violence”. In this regard, the current context in Gaza gives no indication that the recent ceasefire agreed between Israel and Hamas will lead to a genuine long-term truce.

After 50 days of intense conflict, Hamas and Israel have reached yet another ceasefire. While this was welcomed by the Palestinians and celebrated by Hamas as a victory for Palestinian resistance against Israel, on the Israeli side, the prime minister’s acceptance of the ceasefire without a vote or a formal discussion caused a stir within his coalition. However, the so-called “long term ceasefire” that puts an end to Operation Protective Edge (8 July – 26 August 2014) does not actually address the underlying causes of the escalation between Israel and Hamas. Indeed, the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, continues to **deny** Hamas’s demands (especially the full lifting of the eight-year blockade of the Gaza Strip), while Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal is determined to reject any attempt to disarm the movement. Under such circumstances, what achievements has this ceasefire brought about so far?

This ceasefire ends seven weeks of intense conflict between Hamas and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) that caused severe damage, in particular in the Gaza Strip: according to the **latest reports**, Israel suffered 71 fatalities (64 soldiers and 6 civilians) and has spent several billion dollars to ensure the success of the military operation and the protection of the Israeli home front. In the Gaza Strip, the level of damage is much more significant. Over 2,100 Palestinians have been killed, the bulk of them civilians; more than 11,000 have been injured; almost half a million—a quarter of Gaza’s population—are internally displaced; while the destruction of more than 18,000 housing units, added to the already existing housing deficit, has created the worst humanitarian crisis Gaza has seen in decades.

Despite the large scale destruction of the Gaza Strip, Hamas has **claimed** “victory for the resistance”. Politically, the position of Hamas has been strengthened as a result of this operation for a number of reasons. First, Hamas was able to stand up to the Israel Defense Force for seven weeks, thereby damaging Tel Aviv’s deterrence capacity. Second, as a result of this, Hamas ended the confrontation in a stronger position than when it started and managed to include certain conditions in the

ceasefire agreement that Israel had hitherto ignored: Israel has agreed to open the border crossings with Gaza to allow humanitarian aid and reconstruction material to enter and to extend the fishing zone to a distance of six nautical miles. This partial lifting of the blockade in Gaza has raised **Hamas's popularity** among Palestinians, at least for the moment—if rebuilding takes a long time, which is likely, its popularity may be negatively affected. Last but not least, Hamas—until now largely side-lined from the peace talks—has become an indispensable interlocutor in the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

By contrast, in Israel, though the number of Israeli casualties was disproportionately lower than that of Palestinians, this ceasefire cannot be considered a military victory. Netanyahu, who launched this “war” in Gaza with the stated goal of destroying Hamas rule, has seen his popularity drop and faces harsh criticism. Even though the Israeli prime minister claims that the IDF have killed many Hamas military leaders, degraded Hamas’s arsenal of rockets and destroyed the tunnel network, he is blamed for not having achieved the main military goal of this operation: putting an end to Hamas’s rule. Instead of this, at the end of its confrontation with Hamas, Israel was in the weaker position: it managed to restore calm in the south only by agreeing to the above-mentioned conditions in favour of Hamas. As for Israel’s main demand—the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip—it still has a long way to go: according to its leaders, Hamas is determined to reject any attempt to disarm them. As a result, Netanyahu’s claim that Israel has secured a “great military and political” victory over Hamas has been met with scepticism by many Israelis, including from within his own ranks. According to a **poll** published in the Israeli daily Haaretz, 54% of those surveyed believe that neither side won this war. The only “achievement” Netanyahu was able to emphasize was that he would not respond favourably to Hamas’s demands such as the total lifting of the blockade, the construction of a deep sea port, an airport and salary payments. All these demands will no doubt be raised during the coming negotiations that will resume in Cairo. In this context, is a long-lasting truce between Hamas and Israel anywhere in sight?

Though agreed by Hamas and Israel and observed by both sides until now, there is no clear indication that this ceasefire will pave the way to a permanent solution in as far as the agreement does not tackle any of the core issues: Hamas **refuses** to demilitarize the Gaza Strip while Israel is determined to maintain the blockade. Besides which, this is the third agreement that the prime minister, Mr Netanyahu, has signed with Hamas since he entered office in 2009 and it is very similar to previous ones: in 2009 as well as in 2012, Israel agreed to alleviate the blockade by facilitating the circulation of people and goods but eventually reneged on this promise. The blockade has been maintained since that time, and the economic and social situation in the Gaza Strip has deteriorated. Moreover, Hamas seems clearly determined to negotiate the complete lifting of the blockade in Gaza as well as the aforementioned demands (sea port, airport, etc.) while Netanyahu—who is facing plenty of criticism from right-wing members of his coalition—insists on the rejection of Hamas’s demands. Considering all that, the ceasefire was reached because it was the only way to offer a face-saving exit to both Hamas and Netanyahu in the eighth consecutive week of what had become a lengthy war of attrition.

In a wider perspective, benefiting from the renewed interest in settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, has announced a “**major political surprise**” that includes renewed negotiations with Israel and Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank within three years. However, immediately after the ceasefire was agreed, a new confrontation erupted between the two Palestinian political factions as Abbas criticised Meshaal’s organization for the prolonged war between Hamas forces and the IDF in Gaza. Over the last weeks a number of signs highlight the re-emerging tension between the two entities: the Palestinian security forces have arrested many Hamas members who celebrated

the end of the war in the West Bank, which contributed to the escalation of tension. Besides this, two core issues must be addressed to allow new reconciliation efforts between Fatah and Hamas: Hamas wants Gaza-based government employees to be paid by the Palestinian Authority, while Fatah—after Abbas accused Hamas of forming a **shadow government** to control the Gaza Strip and the financial aid provided to the Palestinians—demands the unity government undertake the reconstruction of Gaza.

Whatever Abbas' proposal brings to the table, the latest confrontation between Hamas and Israel made two things certain. Firstly, that engaging with Hamas in peace talks is critical for any long term peace. And secondly, given the situation in Gaza—where **reconstruction could take 20 years**—a failure to meet Hamas's core demands (starting with the lifting of the blockade) could lead to a renewal of fighting. In this regard, apart from Abbas's proposal, we should keep an eye on the negotiations between Israel and Hamas that will resume in early October in Cairo.