THE HARD ROAD AHEAD IN GAZA

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The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas is an important breakthrough that will provide long overdue relief to many hostages and their families, while allowing for desperately needed humanitarian assistance to the over two million civilians in Gaza living in horrific conditions.

The agreement is a testament to the persistence of President Biden and his team, which never lost faith over many months of arduous negotiations. It also reflects the close coordination with the incoming Trump team, which provided the political pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu necessary to get the final issues resolved.

While there is much to celebrate, it is important to understand that this is just the first step toward ending the conflict. Unlike Israel's recent ceasefire agreement with Hezbollah, which is intended to permanently end the war in Lebanon, the parties' only firm commitments are to implement the first Phase of Biden's Three-Phase plan to end the war. This includes a pause in fighting for six weeks, the gradual release of 33 civilian hostages in return for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, a partial withdrawal of the IDF from Gaza, and a major surge of humanitarian assistance.

Negotiations over the hardest issues will begin in two weeks, and the parties have never agreed on the core question of whether the agreement will permanently end the war. In fact, Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly made clear that he has no intention of ending the military campaign without the "total defeat" of Hamas. His Foreign Minister, Israel Katz, recently put it bluntly: "The other side understands we are not going to end this war."

Moreover, one of the most extreme parties in Netanyahu's coalition, led by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, already planned to withdraw from the coalition government and pledged to return only if the war resumes. Another, led by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, has demanded assurances that the war will resume, and threatened to leave the coalition if the ceasefire continues. The withdrawal of both parties would trigger the collapse of the current government and lead to new elections that could well end Netanyahu's premiership.

It is entirely possible that to preserve his coalition, Netanyahu has already made commitments that will severely constrain the next round of negotiations, including promising to resume the war or advance efforts to return Israeli settlements to Gaza. Then-Secretary of State John Kerry faced a similar situation in 2013, when the parties agreed to resume direct negotiations on a possible two-state solution. To get approval from the extremists in his coalition, however, Netanyahu committed to a massive expansion of settlements, which caused major problems with the Palestinians during the negotiations.

The Trump administration will obviously have significant influence, and Trump's incoming national security adviser has already signaled that they would support a resumption of the war: "We have made it very clear to the Israelis … If they need to go back in, we are with them."

In many ways, the hard part of ending the war is just beginning. Over the next six weeks, major

progress on critical issues will be required for any hope of reaching a sustainable solution. The history of Israel's conflicts with Hamas over the past twenty years provides little cause for optimism: all have basically ended when the parties had nothing left to accomplish militarily, and with no resolution of the underlying issues. But there is much that can be done to improve the situation on the ground and maximize the possibilities for lasting peace.

The first priority is ensuring that the tenuous ceasefire holds. Secretary Kerry worked tirelessly to reach a ceasefire agreement in 2014, only to have it fall apart within hours. And the first temporary ceasefire in Gaza 14 months ago ended after just seven days. The current agreement wisely includes international implementation monitors and a standing dispute resolution mechanism in Egypt. But getting the parties to honor agreements they may have felt pressured to accept will require constant vigilance and a willingness to hold both sides accountable.

Second, it is essential to create an effective and sustainable process for getting desperately needed humanitarian assistance to the 2.2 million innocent civilians living in unfathomably hard conditions. Almost half of them are children. Over 46,000 Gazans have already been killed, the majority women and children caught in the crossfire of a war they never wanted. Over 80% of homes and schools have been damaged or destroyed, leaving over a million Gazans barely surviving in the Al-Mawasi humanitarian zone alone. With aid severely limited, humanitarian organizations are regularly raising the alarm over the possibility of widespread famine.

The agreement requires Israel to allow at least 600 trucks a day of humanitarian assistance, a major increase from the few dozen per day of recent months. But it will be a major challenge to actually get relief to those in need in the midst of the chaos and looting, including by Hamas.

This is especially difficult given that Israel has cut off cooperation with UNRWA, the main organization delivering assistance. The Biden Administration and countless others around the world have called for reversal of that decision. If Israel continues to refuse, they must provide a viable alternative.

Finally, an agreement must be reached for a post-conflict governance. Despite repeated requests, including from the IDF, Netanyahu has refused to provide any "Day After" plan. In the absence of any alternative, Hamas simply returns to the control areas the Israelis have withdrawn from. This is obviously not sustainable.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently laid out a comprehensive US proposal developed with key regional players. It calls for creating a temporary international mission, in coordination with a reformed Palestinian Authority (PA), to establish law and order, deliver humanitarian assistance, and lay the groundwork for a massive reconstruction effort. The US would also take the lead in training PA security forces to eventually take on security responsibility in Gaza.

The United Arab Emirates and others have offered to provide troops and funding for the new mission, but only if the PA has a major role as part of a pathway to an eventual Palestinian state. Hamas has indicated a willingness to cede governing responsibility to an interim technocratic government formed with the PA. That type of political solution will be necessary given that Hamas still controls thousands of fighters and is constantly recruiting new members, White Netanyahu's pledge to eradicate Hamas is not considered a realistic objective by senior Israeli military leaders, Israel will need a clear and enforceable mechanism to ensure that Hamas no longer poses a threat.

Thus far, however, Netanyahu has flatly refused to allow the PA to play any role in post-war Gaza. While the PA is clearly in need of significant reform, the major impetus is the desire of the Greater Israel extremists to destroy the PA, which they have openly been attempting in the West Bank. Their avowed objective is to make a two-state solution impossible and create the conditions for annexation of the West Bank. Their vision for Gaza is a permanent IDF military occupation, and the "voluntary emigration" of Gazans to other countries as Israel rebuilds settlements.

This is completely at odds with any hopes of finding a sustainable solution for Gaza, so forming a new coalition will likely be necessary to make real progress towards lasting peace. Centrist parties in the Knesset have already offered to replace the extremists.

Netanyahu will always prioritize his political survival, however, and is unlikely to trust moderates. Moreover, he has a personal incentive to continue the war because it will postpone a reckoning for the failures that led to the terrible tragedy of October 7 and subject him to conviction on corruption charges.

Persuading him to change course will likely require a strong push from the US, as we saw with the ceasefire agreement. While this seems unlikely, Trump may have his own priorities – including brokering an historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which would require an end to the war in Gaza and at least some steps towards creating a Palestinian state.

So, even as we rightfully celebrate the return of the first hostages and a pathway to ending the war, it is important to remember that the really hard work is still ahead. As Churchill famously said after an important victory in World War II, "This is not the end of the war. It is not the beginning of the end. But it might be the end of the beginning." Whether this ceasefire is the beginning of the end of the war in Gaza, or merely the end of the beginning, will depend on what happens over the next six weeks. There is no time to waste.