KEY ISSUES IN CEASEFIRE NEGOTIATIONS

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July 21, 2025

Overview

Over the past two weeks, there has been renewed momentum towards a potential ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Both sides have sent negotiating teams to Doha, where the US, Qataris and Egyptians are mediating indirect talks between the parties. The framework is Special Envoy Steve Witkoff's proposal for a 60-day ceasefire and the release of 10 of the reported 20 living hostages and 18 deceased hostages, with negotiations to be held during the ceasefire on a permanent end to the war and release of the remaining hostages. There have been conflicting reports on how close the parties are to a deal.

Trump: Like his predecessor, President Trump has expressed his strong desire for a ceasefire, with his press secretary saying during Netanyahu's visit to the White House on July 7 that: "The utmost priority for the president right now in the Middle East is to end the war in Gaza and return all of the hostages." Witkoff worked closely with the Israelis on the 60-day ceasefire proposal, which the White House has publicly called for Hamas to accept. Trump has suggested several times that a deal was close and could be completed within a week or two. It is unlikely, however, that Trump would actually be willing to exert significant pressure on Netanyahu, as he did when the last ceasefire was agreed to in January. And as Netanyahu showed with the unilateral attack on Iran in the midst of Trump's negotiations, it is not clear whether the Israelis would actually listen.

Netanyahu: For his part, Netanyahu has signaled increased openness to a ceasefire, and his rhetoric has shifted somewhat to prioritize return of the hostages. At the same time, he continues to describe the goal of the war as "the complete elimination" of Hamas, which would make a deal to end the war far more difficult in addition to undermining Hamas' belief in the value of a 60-day deal.

He also faces political challenges on multiple fronts that could ultimately threaten his coalition. There are large protests and public pressure from the majority of Israelis who are calling for the return of all hostages and an end of the war. While Netanyahu has been strengthened politically by the Iran war, he still faces significant pressure from his extremist coalition partners who strongly oppose a ceasefire. He expects Itamar Ben Gvir to resign from the coalition if there is a deal, as he did with the prior ceasefire.

Moreover, Netanyahu faces an ongoing political crisis with the ultra-Orthodox parties over his failure to pass an ultra-Orthodox conscription bill. The United Torah Judaism party recently resigned from the coalition, and all Shas party ministers then resigned from the government. While these defections likely will not lead to the immediate dissolution of the coalition, it poses a major threat to Netanyahu's rule down the road.

Facing conflicting political pressures, Netanyahu once again seems to be playing for time. He appears to be stringing out the negotiations until the Knesset goes out of session on July 27, which

will ensure the coalition survives at least until the Knesset returns in October, and give him more flexibility in the meantime to possibly agree to a ceasefire.

Hamas: New de facto Hamas leader Izz al-Dein al-Haddad has vowed to continue the hardline position of his predecessors, saying he will either achieve "an honorable deal" or continue a "war of martyrdom." However, Hamas' military capabilities have reportedly been devastated, with the loss of most experienced officers and the breakdown of any real command and control. They have lost significant revenue through months of punishing warfare and dire humanitarian restrictions. Moreover, they have ceded control over much of the Gaza Strip to the IDF and clan-based militias, some funded by Israel. And there have been sporadic protests by Gazans against Hamas and calling for an end to the war. In this weakened position, Hamas may be more willing to compromise on key points to allow them time to regroup.

Immediate Ceasefire Issues

There are a number of issues which need to be resolved to reach an agreement on a ceasefire. Most can be resolved if the parties are genuinely committed to reaching a deal – or can provide ample excuses to avoid one if they do not.

Guarantee of permanent end to the war: A primary sticking point has long been Hamas' insistence that the 60-day ceasefire will lead to a permanent end to the war, and Netanyahu's refusal to commit to an end to the war. While Trump has reportedly assured Hamas that the Israelis will at least respect the 60-day pause in fighting, they have been seeking guarantees that negotiations will continue until an agreement is reached on ending the war in return for releasing all remaining hostages. This is directly contrary to Netanyahu's insistence on resuming the war. The US and other mediators have worked hard to find compromise language, but it is not clear whether this issue has finally been resolved – though it's worth noting that a full 74% of Israelis support a full end to the war in exchange for the release of all remaining hostages.

Positioning of IDF and Return of Gazans to the north: A major new stumbling block has reportedly emerged over the positioning of the IDF during the ceasefire. While Hamas wants the IDF to withdraw to the same lines as the prior ceasefire, Netanyahu is reportedly insisting that the IDF remain in the areas it now controls. In particular, he wants Israel to retain control of the "Morag Corridor," a strip of land the IDF has created to cut off the southern part of Gaza, which would prevent Gazans from returning to the north.

Delivery of Humanitarian Assistance: Hamas is pushing for the resumption of full humanitarian assistance through the United Nations and other NGO's, while Netanyahu would like to continue disbursing aid through the GHF. A compromise is likely possible on this issue.

Hostage and Prisoner Releases: The parties have agreed to the number of hostages to be released, but how they will be chosen and which Palestinian prisoners will be released in return may still need to be finalized.

Key Long-term Issues

Even if the parties agree on a 60-day ceasefire, there are still very significant issues regarding the “day after” in Gaza that would need to be resolved in order to end the war and secure the release of all hostages. Before unilaterally ending the last ceasefire in March, Netanyahu refused to start negotiations on these larger issues. Even if he is open to those talks now, Netanyahu may well insist on Hamas disarming and agreeing to send its senior leaders out of the Strip. There is no indication Hamas will accept what amounts to a full surrender.

More broadly, Netanyahu has still not accepted any “day after" plan, including an Egyptian proposal for an interim technocratic government and massive reconstruction effort. Reports suggest that his government is instead considering an indefinite military occupation.

When pushed, Netanyahu has said Israel’s position is the Trump plan to encourage “voluntary migration” by as many Gazans as possible. His government, with US support, has been actively seeking countries to permanently accept refugees from Gaza. The military campaign has included systematic destruction of most remaining structures in Gaza and seems designed to ensure that Gazans have nowhere to return to.

Moreover, extremist ministers in his coalition openly want to keep at least the northern part of the Strip permanently and build new Israeli settlements there. In fact, Netanyahu reportedly told Bezalel Smotrich that: “After a pause, we will transfer the population in the Strip southward and impose a siege on northern Gaza.” Defense Minister Katz has been briefing a plan to drive some 600,000 Gazans into a “humanitarian city” area controlled by the IDF near Rafah, with nobody allowed to leave, and plans to eventually move all 2 million civilians there. According to many Israeli experts, this plan of forced population transfers would be a clear violation of international law.