



Gaza cease-fire strains under pressure, sapping hopes of wider deal

Analysis: Despite victory speeches on all sides after the truce, concerns are growing over its implementation

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Despite an end to Israeli bombardment, the quieting of Palestinian rocket fire and a return to what had passed for normality in Gaza, the cease-fire between Israel and Palestinian factions is under growing pressure. Halting the fighting was meant to be only the first step in a truce aimed in part at altering the conditions of the long-term Israeli-Egyptian siege of Gaza, but there has been little movement on implementing a wider agreement.

Seemingly different interpretations of the deal by both sides were highlighted last week when two Gaza fishermen were reported as having been [fired on by the Israeli navy](#) on Sept. 2. The next day [two other fishermen were detained](#) at sea, had their boat confiscated by Israel and were taken to a secret location for interrogation. The fishermen said their boats were within the six-nautical-mile fishing limit now allowed by Israel, while Israel says they were out of bounds.

The incidents at sea, however, were minor illustrations of the problems facing a cease-fire whose terms have not been made public and look likely to be contested by the rival parties.

The official terms of the cease-fire agreement have been concealed by the parties involved, which may be intentional, since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces heavy criticism in Israel for negotiating with Hamas.

“The truce satisfied almost nobody in [Netanyahu’s] government, particularly its restive right wing, which wanted to see Hamas completely crushed,” Gregg Carlstrom wrote in [Foreign Policy](#) magazine. “Polls show that the prime minister’s approval rating [has plunged](#) as low as 32 percent, after hitting the mid-80s in July.”

Keeping the terms private allows Israel and Palestinian factions to avoid scrutiny by their constituents and also to dodge accountability over whether they are implementing their side of the bargain.

Lisa Goldman, director of the Israel-Palestine Initiative at the [New America Foundation](#), said breaches to the agreement should be expected.

“Given the very vague terms of the cease-fire agreement, combined with the fact that neither side achieved any substantial gains during the war that Israel named Protective Edge, it’s no surprise at all that it’s already being violated,” she said.

Palestinian faction leaders and officials have said the agreement called for an indefinite halt to hostilities, the immediate opening of Gaza’s blockaded border crossings to allow in goods and reconstruction materials and a widening of the enclave’s fishing zone in the Mediterranean. In addition, a security buffer zone imposed by Israel inside the border of the Gaza Strip will be gradually reduced.

The second part of the agreement is to hold indirect talks in Cairo one month after the end of hostilities to consider key issues that were not agreed on during the first round of talks — particularly the terms on which the long-term siege will be eased, which was Hamas’ key demand for ending the fighting.

Israel, however, has been less clear in describing the terms of the deal. Aaron Sagui, spokesman of the Embassy of Israel in Washington, told Al Jazeera in an email:

“We agreed at the outset to one thing — to carry out the humanitarian rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip, with supervisory mechanisms and oversight abilities in our hands. This is in order to prevent the entry of weapons or materials that could be used to produce weapons. We have always agreed to this, but we did not agree to accept any of Hamas’ conditions, and the fact is that this cease-fire was achieved without the conditions that it set.”

Despite the cease-fire agreement’s calling for a resumption of indirect talks in Cairo, Netanyahu was reported in [Israeli media](#) to be planning to stay away. This would violate the cease-fire terms, as explained by the Palestinian side.

Ihab al-Ghussein, spokesman of the Interior Ministry in Gaza and a member of Hamas, told Al Jazeera that the Palestinians would wait for the “formal and official response from the Egyptian side about what the response is from the Israelis.”

“Then we will decide our response,” Ghussein said.

He added that, until now, the borders have yet to be opened to allow in consumer goods and constructions materials for rebuilding.

Diana Buttu, a former adviser to the Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Mahmoud Abbas, said Israel is “still operating on the same rules that they were operating on before the attacks took place.”

“Israel is still restricting the goods and types of goods that can enter the Gaza Strip and the quantity of goods.”

Israel confirmed that claim. “Dual purpose items [such as concrete] need to be further examined,” Sagui said. “The cease-fire does not change this.”

Egypt as enforcer?

Holding both sides accountable to the terms of the deal, according to Palestinian factions, is the task of the Egyptian mediator serving ostensibly as an enforcer. But it is unclear how much pressure Egypt is able or willing to impose on Israel.

According to a 2012 cease-fire agreement, “Egypt shall receive assurances from each party that the party commits to what was agreed upon” and “each party shall commit itself not to perform any acts that would breach this understanding. In case of any observations, Egypt as the sponsor of this understanding shall be informed to follow up.”

However, numerous breaches of the 2012 cease-fire by Israel were met with no repercussions from a third party or others in the international community.

Egypt’s role as an apparent underwriter of the deal “continues to be problematic” because of its interests in weakening the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot Hamas, said **Benedetta Berti**, a research fellow at the [Institute for National Security Studies](#) in Israel.

“Egypt’s pressure on Israel during this round of escalation has not necessarily been a strong incentive for Israel to pursue a speedy end to the conflict,” she said. “Now with the cease-fire in place, Egypt will continue to pursue its own political strategy, which does not clash substantially with Israel’s preferred option for Gaza.”

For the cease-fire to last, the terms of the agreement must be implemented and respected, but Buttu argues that that is not the reality.

“The reason it is not holding up is because this agreement lacks all teeth. There’s no means of actually enforcing anything,” she said.

When asked why the Palestinians would agree to a cease-fire agreement similar to previous ones that did not ensure Israel would abide by the terms it agreed to, Buttu said the Palestinians “had no choice.”

“Palestinians are left with one or two options — continue to be pummeled by the Israelis and have the world just watch, which is not really an option,” she said. “Or option two was try to broker some sort of cease-fire arrangement and hope that the world community will wake up and make sure that it gets enforced. There really is no third option in place.”

Though it seems the terms of the agreement will not be enforced and some aspects of the deal will continue to be breached, experts believe it is in neither side's interest to escalate the conflict back to the battlefield — at least for now.

“Minor violations of the cease-fire at this point would not be enough to lead to its collapse,” Berti said. “Although a major Israeli operation” — like a targeted assassination of a Hamas military leader — “would likely lead to a resumption in hostilities.”

Goldman believes that unless there is serious change in the status quo, “the pattern of the past six years will repeat itself again.”

“Hamas will rearm over the next 18 months or so, Israel will launch another military operation aimed at reducing Hamas' military capacity, and then we'll start all over again,” she said. “It's an absolutely tragic situation, with the civilians in Gaza paying the biggest price.”

Palestinian ‘unity’

Internally, Palestinians have their own obstacles in the way of implementation of the larger cease-fire plan. Hamas and Abbas are at odds over how to administer Gaza under a new unity government.

Hamas has ruled Gaza since 2007 after elections and battles with Fatah. Now Hamas and its rival have agreed to a unity government, but disagreements over the salaries of civil servants in the Hamas-led government and the role of fighters remain.

“On this issue Fatah and Hamas have yet to agree. Even more problematic is the issue of the payment [and] status of the Qassam Brigades in Gaza and the issue of unity of weapons — a very sticky point,” Berti said.

Israel is still demanding Hamas and other groups in Gaza disarm — a condition that has been rejected by the Palestinian factions and by all accounts is not mentioned in the cease-fire agreement. But Israel may be hoping that Western powers and regional opponents of Hamas such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia will support that demand and back Abbas to pressure the Gaza factions to lay down their arms. That would almost certainly renew the internal Palestinian rift and set the clock ticking on the end of the cease-fire.

“Personally, I see the resumption of rockets to be more linked to the collapse of the unity government or the collapse of any progress on issues such as border [crossings] or salaries,” Berti said.

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