

# Bitter Harvests: The Gaza Ceasefire

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*Twinning the terms “ceasefire” and “Gaza” seems not only incongruous but an obscene joke. This is largely because the ceasefire announced on January 15 between Israel and Hamas could have been reached so much earlier by all the concerned parties. But will was lacking in Washington to force Israel’s hand, and Israeli **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** was repeatedly of the belief that Hamas had to be unconditionally defeated, if not extirpated altogether, for any such arrangements to be reached.*

A general outline of the ceasefire terms [was released](#) by Qatar, a vital broker in the talks between Hamas and Israel. According to its Ministry of Foreign Affairs release, there are to be three phases in the agreement. The first phase will involve the release of 33 Israeli detainees in exchange for a number of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The second and third phase “will be finalized during the implementation of the first phase.”

The first stage will last for six weeks and see, should things pan out, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from all populated areas of Gaza and the return of Palestinians to their neighbourhoods. (To say homes, in this regard, would be monstrously distasteful, seeing that many would have been flattened.) Humanitarian aid deliveries will also be increased and distributed “on a large scale” through the Strip, while hospitals, health centres, and bakeries will be rehabilitated. Supplies of fuel for civilian use and shelter for displaced persons deprived of their homes will also be facilitated.

The second stage envisages a conclusion to the war, a full withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from the Strip and the return of all remaining living hostages in return for another allotment of Palestinian prisoners. The third entails reconstructing Gaza and the return of any remaining bodies of the hostages.

Despite his habitual impotence in the face of Netanyahu, US **President Joe Biden** saw the agreement as a masterstroke. Oddly enough, he [insisted](#) that the plan resembled almost to the letter a plan he had advanced in May 2024. “I laid out the precise contours of this plan on May 31, 2024, after which it was endorsed unanimously by the UN Security Council.”

He omitted to mention the US vetoing of no fewer than five ceasefire resolutions proposed at that same body, not to mention those foggy “red lines” he insisted Netanyahu never cross when waging war against Hamas and the Palestinian populace. Such gestures as delaying the shipment of 2,000-pound bombs for fear that they might be used by the IDF in such areas as Rafah were purely symbolic in nature.

As Netanyahu had no interest in being bound by any such lines of engagement, Biden’s national security advisor, **Jake Sullivan**, could only crankily [remark to reporters](#) that it was

all a media obsession. “The whole issue of the red line, as you define it, is something that you guys like; it’s almost become a bit of a national parlour game.”

While Biden clawed and scraped for credit, it was incoming US **President Donald Trump** claiming the lion’s share. And why not? With his inauguration on January 20, the timing of the ceasefire, with Israel finally relenting, was no coincidence.

“This EPIC ceasefire agreement,” Trump stated in a [roaring post](#) on his Truth Social platform, “could only have happened as result of our Historic Victory in November, as it signalled to the entire World that my Administration would seek Peace and negotiate deals to ensure the safety of all Americans, and our Allies.”

While Biden and his officials fumed at this claim, it was clear that Trump had a sharp point. His incoming Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff has had a busy January interposing in the negotiation process, spending time in Doha as part of the discussions on the Israeli hostages, then meeting Netanyahu in a January 11 encounter that was [reported](#) to be “tense”.

According to the *Times of Israel*, Witkoff was [most insistent](#) that the Israeli PM accept essential compromises. Two nights after their meeting, the negotiating teams of both Israel and Hamas notified the mediators that they had accepted the deal on hostages in principle. In the view of two Arab officials cited in the paper, Trump’s envoy had done “more to sway the premier in a single sit-down than outgoing President Joe Biden did all year”.

Whoever claims credit for these latest developments hardly lessens the bitterness of the harvest. The prevarications, delays and obstructions have permitted massive destruction and loss of life to take place. Cowardice and bad faith have been the hallmarks of the process. It remains unclear how all the relevant parties will behave. Netanyahu will remain bitter that his goals of eliminating Hamas have not been achieved. It’s a point that his cabinet colleagues on the far right, Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, are all too readily reminding him of.

The question of who controls Gaza after the phases conclude remains a thick encumbrance. Then comes that big issue after Trump’s inauguration. How far will his involvement be constructive in achieving a lasting peace, or merely default to the exclusive security goals and interests of Israel? If history is a reliable guide on this point, the omens are not good.

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