

What to Make of Hamas and Israel's Pending Cease-Fire

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Palestinians receive bags of flour at the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) distribution center in the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip on Nov. 21, 2023. (SAID KHATIB/AFP via Getty Images)

A temporary cease-fire in Gaza will probably give way to resumed combat operations, but in a currently less likely scenario, it could eventually open a path for Hamas' withdrawal from the strip. Israel's war Cabinet is expected to soon authorize a partial cease-fire deal with the Palestinian militant group Hamas in what is slated to be the first sustained break in fighting since the war broke out on Oct. 7. As part of the pending deal, Hamas has reportedly agreed to release up to 50 Israeli hostages, mostly women and children, in exchange for Israel releasing around 150 Palestinian prisoners currently held in Israeli jails. The agreement is expected to see increased aid into the Gaza Strip, a four-day cease-fire between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Hamas, and a potential second phase that will see more hostages and prisoners exchanged, along with a possible extension of the cease-fire beyond the next few days. The deal does not appear to include other militant groups in the Gaza Strip like Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), nor is it

immediately clear whether other militant groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen would also adhere to the pause in fighting, given their demands for a permanent cease-fire. In addition, the cease-fire will reportedly not see Israel withdraw its troops from the Gaza Strip, nor will it see Israel halt its planned operations in southern Gaza.

- Muslim and Arab states have been aiming for a comprehensive cease-fire since the war began last month, but the United States has backed Israel's war goal of removing Hamas from power in the Gaza Strip in response to its Oct. 7 attack. However, U.S. President Joe Biden has come under increasing domestic pressure to improve humanitarian conditions in Gaza and pause fighting, with his Democratic Party split between pro-Israel and -Palestinian factions.
- Hamas claims that it does not hold all of the estimated 240 hostages taken during the Oct. 7 assault. PIJ and reported criminal groups in Gaza also supposedly hold some of the hostages.
- Since the IDF's ground invasion began in late October, Israel has taken substantial amounts of territory in the northern Gaza Strip, where Hamas reportedly had most of its fighters and infrastructure in the territory's largest city, Gaza City. Most Palestinian civilians have fled to southern Gaza, and on Nov. 18, the IDF announced that it was expanding operations to that part of the territory.

The reported terms of the cease-fire suggest that the halt in major fighting will be temporary, with both sides likely to violate the truce by continuing to conduct attacks. Israel has not stepped away from its overall goal of removing Hamas from power in the Gaza Strip, and with Washington's backing, will eventually resume major military operations to reoccupy the strip as part of this strategy. The Biden administration has also signaled that it thinks that a permanent cease-fire would benefit Hamas by enabling the militants to retreat and regroup for future attacks against Israel. This suggests that once the diplomatic process to free as many hostages as possible is exhausted, the White House will resume backing major Israeli military operations in Gaza short of other options to remove Hamas from power. While domestic political pressures could see the Biden

administration try to convince Israel behind the scenes to extend the cease-fire or slow its military operations in southern Gaza, ultimately the White House will likely publicly back Israel's actions, especially if there are further attacks by Palestinian militants or Iranian-backed groups. To this end, with IDF troops on the ground in Gaza and militant groups like PIJ left out of the cease-fire agreement, cease-fire violations are likely as militants continue to attack IDF soldiers and the IDF continues to carry out operations against Hamas, PIJ and other groups and respond to provocations. Further abroad, Iran-aligned militant groups — including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen — will likely keep conducting attacks against Israeli and U.S. interests as well, in a bid to pressure both countries to enact a permanent truce.

- PIJ has a demonstrated record of carrying out operations independent of Hamas. In August 2022, PIJ fought a short conflict with Israel in which Hamas declined to intervene.
- As Israel's war Cabinet was preparing to vote on the cease-fire, IDF troops were reportedly preparing to encircle another Hamas stronghold in the Jabaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.
- Hezbollah has recently been escalating the scale of its attacks on Israel's borders with Lebanon, while on Nov. 19, Yemeni Houthis hijacked a ship in the Red Sea they claimed was associated with Israel. Houthi rebels in Yemen have also launched multiple drone and missile attacks against Israel.

When the cease-fire expires, Israel will likely resume its major military campaign to remove Hamas from power in Gaza, in an effort to stay ahead of U.S. diplomatic pressure. While it is possible that the recently enacted cease-fire could be renewed, Israel has already authorized its military to begin operations in the southern Gaza strip, which had previously been declared a humanitarian zone as the IDF focused on the north. Airstrikes have already begun on the outskirts of Khan Younis, the largest city in southern Gaza. Given the increasingly small geographic space remaining under Hamas control, the IDF may be able to finish up its major ground operations in the coming weeks or at the

beginning of 2024, though Israeli troops would still need more time to hunt down Hamas fighters hiding in the group's expansive underground tunnel system and suppress a possible insurgency.

In a less likely scenario, Israel and Hamas may continue the diplomatic process begun with these hostage and prisoner exchanges to develop alternative means for Hamas to withdraw from the Gaza Strip without a full-scale Israeli military assault. Hamas fighters face certain conventional military suppression by the IDF in Gaza, incentivizing elements of Hamas to find alternative means to preserve experienced personnel and possible weapons. With Hamas now based in Lebanon, Syria and Iran, the group's fighters and leaders in Gaza have several options for potential withdrawals. These would require Israel's cooperation, which does not at the moment seem likely as both the Israeli public and government are focused on defeating Hamas militarily. But U.S. diplomatic pressure may build on Israel as 2024 begins, particularly if major combat operations have not ended and there continues to be an escalated risk of regional war between Israel and Iran. In this scenario, Washington would pressure Israel to accept a partial or full Hamas withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, allowing the IDF to take control of the territory.

- Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon saw Israel agree to allow the Palestine Liberation Organization to withdraw to Tunisia. This decision was in part informed by pressure from the United States, which was concerned about long-term Israeli involvement in Lebanon in the context of the Cold War.
- Yahya Sinwar, the head of Hamas' politburo, remains in the Gaza Strip, as do other key members of the group's inner circle and leadership teams. Israel has claimed that it wants to capture or kill everyone responsible for the Oct. 7 assault, including Sinwar, incentivizing Hamas' political wing to try to cut a deal that preserves its Gaza-based leaders and extracts them to a nominally friendly country.
- Hamas has established a presence in southern Lebanon that has enabled it to carry out attacks on Israel from there, incentivizing militants in the Gaza Strip to favor a withdrawal to Lebanon where they can carry out an armed struggle into the future.