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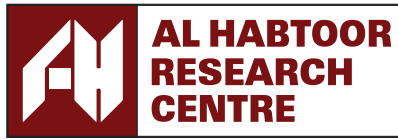
Truce and Tactic

The Political Calculus of Ceasefires



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Chief Executive Officer
Islam Ghoneim

Research Director
Dr. Azza Hashem

Writer
Habiba Diaaeldin

Art Director
Dr. Ranya Hawas

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In today's volatile political landscape, ceasefires are becoming increasingly relevant. While they are not designed to bring an immediate end to conflicts, they aim to provide a temporary respite in which opposing parties can engage in dialogue and work toward a resolution. Ideally, ceasefires function as transitional phases within ongoing wars, offering the opportunity for negotiation and compromise. However, as a political tool, ceasefires often fail to meet their objectives. Their effectiveness is not simply determined by military action, but by the political will and complex considerations of the parties involved. Ceasefires are heavily influenced by the intentions of the signatories, as not all parties are genuinely committed to ending hostilities. This raises important questions about how we define the success or failure of a ceasefire. If the stated goal is to end the war, yet political agendas remain hidden, the resumption of conflict may not necessarily mean that the ceasefire has failed—it could indicate that one party's objectives were unfulfilled, while the other may have achieved its goals.

Additionally, each ceasefire agreement is unique, shaped by the specific political dynamics at play, including the roles of mediators, guarantees, and the structure of the agreement itself. The Israel-Hamas ceasefire is a striking example of this complexity. While it may appear to be a failure from a broader, collective perspective, it could represent a significant political and military opportunity for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The influence of external actors, such as U.S. President Donald Trump, must also be considered as part of the equation. Ultimately, the fragile truce between Hamas and Israel raises a critical question: Is it merely a political process, or does it reflect a deeper, more strategic calculation that extends beyond the immediate cessation of hostilities?

The Politics of No Criteria

What makes a successful ceasefire? While ceasefires are typically intended to stop active violence, their purpose is not always to fully resolve the broader conflict. Therefore, the criteria for judging a ceasefire's success should differ. Evaluation should be based on the specific aims of the ceasefire itself. In reality, expecting a complete end to violence sets a very high standard for assessment. Instead, a more reasonable benchmark would be a significant decrease in hostilities. Total cessation may be ideal, but achieving a notable reduction in violence is often the most realistic and practical outcome in these circumstances.

One method for evaluating a ceasefire is by measuring the decline in the frequency of violent incidents. A relative assessment would consider the level of violence before the agreement as a reference point, then analyse the extent of its reduction afterward. Alternatively, severity can be assessed through the number of fatalities among combatants and/or civilians. The geographic coverage of a ceasefire is also important, as such agreements may only apply to specific regions. This creates the risk of ignoring potential spillover effects, such as increased violence in areas outside the ceasefire's scope.

On one hand, the previously mentioned criteria remain relevant. However, many argue that evaluating a ceasefire based on its stated or intended purpose offers a more accurate measure. Ceasefires serve a range of objectives—some aim to bring a definitive end to conflict and are known as final or permanent ceasefires. Others share the goal of conflict termination but are designed to operate over a longer period, often by facilitating negotiations that work toward resolution. These types of ceasefires typically precede or coincide with peace talks and aim to foster an environment conducive to political dialogue. The rationale is that negotiations are difficult to initiate or

advance when violence persists, as continued hostilities fuel mutual distrust and hostility. In this context, a ceasefire can contribute to the peace process by opening political space for meaningful talks, fostering trust between parties, or laying the groundwork for initial security cooperation.

In many situations, continued violence imposes significant costs, yet reaching a comprehensive agreement to end the conflict may not be feasible. In such cases, parties may agree to a ceasefire involving limited concessions without resolving the conflict permanently. This often results in a temporary pause in hostilities, lasting until one or more parties believe their interests are better served by resuming fighting or moving toward a negotiated settlement. Some ceasefires are also strategically motivated, aiming to provide military advantages. During these pauses, states or armed groups may regroup, refill supplies, and recruit additional forces. Another possible objective is to restore internal political stability, particularly when governments face domestic unrest or declining public support due to the burdens of war. While most ceasefires are shaped by political and military considerations, others are declared to enable humanitarian efforts—such as delivering aid or providing medical assistance. Despite their humanitarian framing, these ceasefires can also indirectly support political aims, including the reorganization of military strength or easing internal tensions.

In the case of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, its effectiveness can be evaluated based on the reduction in violence rather than its complete cessation. Although some breaches may occur, the frequency and severity of such incidents offer more realistic indicators of the ceasefire's success. The truce experienced violations and mutual accusations from both sides. Since the Gaza ceasefire took effect on January 19 until its collapse, Israeli attacks resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Palestinians. Meanwhile, Israel

accused Hamas of violating the agreement by returning incorrect bodies, an act Netanyahu labelled as a breach of the ceasefire. While such incidents were not highly frequent, their intensity played a more significant role in assessing the overall stability of the agreement.

A second, and arguably more accurate, method for assessing a ceasefire is to determine whether it achieved its intended objectives. In the case of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire, assessing its purpose is somewhat complicated. While the text of the agreement outlined official goals, there were also underlying intentions—particularly from Israeli leadership, including Netanyahu—that were not explicitly stated. The formal ceasefire document listed several key objectives: halting hostilities, exchanging hostages, allowing the entry of humanitarian aid and fuel, initiating Gaza's reconstruction, and lifting the full blockade on the Gaza Strip. An evaluation of these aims reveals that only some were fulfilled. Temporary cessation of violence occurred, along with the exchange of prisoners and some humanitarian access. However, critical goals—such as Gaza's reconstruction and the lifting of the siege—remained unachieved. The agreement collapsed in less than two months when Israel resumed its military operations. Meanwhile, it has been argued that Netanyahu never intended to end the war or to support Gaza's reconstruction and the easing of the blockade. These hidden political motives contrast sharply with the publicly stated aims of the ceasefire agreement.

Although the official goals of the ceasefire were not achieved—ultimately leading to its collapse—this does not necessarily mean the ceasefire was a

complete failure. When viewed through the lens of Prime Minister Netanyahu's intentions, a different conclusion may emerge. The truce provided Netanyahu with much-needed political relief at home. The emotional scenes of hostages reuniting with their families helped ease public frustration



and momentarily restored calm among many Israelis. In the short term, Israeli political analysts argued that any agreement securing the release of hostages and pausing military operations in Gaza would likely boost Netanyahu's domestic standing. Despite opposition from the Israeli far-right, Netanyahu managed to navigate this challenge by redirecting military efforts toward the West Bank instead of Gaza—an apparent attempt to placate his critics and buy time.

While the temporary ceasefire provided Netanyahu with a chance to reassess his internal political standing, it also functioned as a crucial strategic pause that allowed Israel to regroup and rebuild its military capabilities ahead of further escalation. During this pause, Israel began withdrawing from what it terms the Netzarim corridor—a series of military positions dividing the Gaza Strip—which was initially designed to control the return of civilians and prevent Hamas operatives from re-entering northern Gaza, an area

previously subjected to intense Israeli operations. The magnitude of Israel's losses underscored the need for such a pause. According to current Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir, the actual death toll among Israeli soldiers far exceeds previously reported figures. This ceasefire coincided with a period of diminishing Hamas capabilities due to battlefield dynamics and regional shifts, including the weakening of Iran's influence. Together, these factors indicate that Israel derived substantial strategic benefit from the ceasefire period.

Intersected Factors

The effectiveness and success of ceasefires depend on several factors. While technical issues, such as the implementation of the agreement's details, may hinder its success, political factors also play a crucial role. This includes the willingness of all parties involved in the agreement, including both the conflicting parties and the mediators.

To begin with, mediation plays a crucial role in both the creation and implementation of a ceasefire agreement. It is believed to increase the likelihood of success by enhancing communication, improving the design of the process, and providing political support for the agreement. More importantly, mediators who possess leverage over any of the conflicting parties can effectively oversee the implementation of the deal. For example, in cases of violations, mediators can intervene with the conflicting parties to prevent further escalation. In other words, the mediator's role extends beyond signing the agreement to ensuring its sustainable implementation. Conversely, mediators can also play a detrimental role, contributing to the collapse and failure of the ceasefire. In either scenario, it is not necessary for all mediators to play the same part; it only takes one mediator—especially one with greater political influence than the other signatories—to either undermine the agreement or, conversely, help maintain its success.

In the case of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire, the United States, as a mediator, played a key role in pressuring the parties, particularly Israel, to accept the ceasefire. Initially, the election of Donald Trump put pressure on the Biden administration to urge Netanyahu to agree to the ceasefire. Without this pressure, it is argued that Netanyahu, who had been refusing to sign any agreement for over a year, would not have accepted the deal in January 2025. Ironically, while the U.S. played a pivotal role in facilitating the ceasefire at first, it later became the catalyst for its failure. After Hamas rejected the release of more hostages, Trump allegedly gave Netanyahu the green light to resume military action in Gaza. While the White House expressed support for the renewed operation, the rest of the international community, including other mediators, either condemned Israel or expressed regret over the return to fighting.

Secondly, achieving long-term ceasefires is highly challenging without guarantees that ensure the implementation of the political process. Once an actor has made the difficult and costly decision to go to war, they are less likely to support an agreement to end the violence if the process fails to address the underlying reasons for their conflict. In the absence of a viable political process, ceasefires can leave leaders vulnerable to accusations of betraying their cause, which may lead to internal leadership challenges, fragmentation, or even military attacks from rivals.

The Israel-Hamas ceasefire lacked the necessary guarantees, which contributed to its instability. The exchange of hostages between the two sides was fraught with difficulties, and the failure to secure the release of more hostages—a point not part of the original agreement—created an opportunity for Netanyahu, who was seeking a justification to resume the war. Netanyahu was already facing internal challenges. Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich had threatened to leave the coalition if Netanyahu moved to

Phase two rather than restarting the offensive. Opposition parties had promised to support Netanyahu in any agreement that would bring back hostages, but his coalition would have been severely weakened, making early elections a likely outcome. By resuming the fighting, Netanyahu ensured Smotrich's continued support. Following the military strikes, Netanyahu also regained support from another far-right ally, Itamar Ben-Gvir, whose party had left the coalition in January over the ceasefire but returned afterward. The internal divisions within Israel, combined with pressure from far-right factions, provided Netanyahu with a further rationale to break the ceasefire. Without guarantees against ceasefire violations or its full dismantling, Netanyahu was able to resume the war with little concern for political consequences.

A third important factor to consider in ceasefires is the balance of power between the conflicting parties. If one side holds a significant military advantage over the other, the ceasefire is inherently fragile. The stronger party may not perceive enough loss in agreeing to a pause and could choose to return to war if it sees fit. A strategic calculation may lead the militarily superior party to view the ceasefire as an opportunity to recover their military capabilities, reassess their power, or redefine their strategy. Additionally, it is important to consider the rival's inability to resume fighting, or at least their inability to do so in comparison to one's own military advantage.

As of October 2023, Israel has one of the most advanced and well-funded militaries in the world, backed by \$3.8 billion in annual U.S. funding under a 10-year agreement. The IDF consists of approximately 169,500 personnel, with 360,000 of its 400,000 reservists mobilized following the attack. The U.S. has further supported Israel by

providing additional munitions and deploying two aircraft carriers, the USS Gerald Ford and the USS Eisenhower, to the Eastern Mediterranean, along with a fleet of support ships capable of missile defence, command operations, and humanitarian aid.

Hamas, in contrast, has an estimated 15,000 to 40,000 fighters within its Al-Qassam Brigades. It relies on a diverse arsenal sourced from Iran, Syria, Libya, and other regions, including improvised explosives, drones, and rockets—most of which are locally manufactured and relatively basic. Hezbollah, a Lebanon-based group backed by Iran, is estimated to have between 20,000 and 50,000 fighters and an arsenal of up to 200,000 rockets and missiles, including precision-guided ones. Hezbollah's weapons systems are sourced from Iran, Syria, Russia, and China.

Israel's defence systems include the Iron Dome, a fleet of 345 fighter jets, 1300 armoured vehicles, submarines, and reportedly around



90 nuclear warheads, although Israel has never officially declared itself a nuclear state. Besides its military superiority, Israel also holds a political advantage, especially with the support of U.S. President Donald Trump. After more than a year-long fighting in January 2025, Israel could not achieve its published goal of Hamas' annihilation.

Even with considerable economic and military loss, there is still a considerable Israeli military and political advantage in comparison with its rivals in Gaza who have levied considerable losses especially with certain regional dynamics including the assassination of prominent Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, the fall of Al-Assad regime, and the weakening of Iran. However, despite these regional dynamics which come in the favour of Israel, it is arguably not a strategically correct decision from a military and economic point of view to resume fighting which means that the decision is purely political.

The Fragile Truce

While some factors are common across different ceasefire agreements, the Israel-Hamas ceasefire has unique characteristics. For one, it is a ceasefire between a state and a non-state actor, which adds a layer of complexity. Moreover, while the agreement aimed to end the siege of Gaza, it lacked a clear plan for implementation. A Gaza reconstruction plan, recognized as a key objective of the ceasefire, was presented by Arab states but was rejected by the U.S. This highlights the fragile nature of the ceasefire from the start, as it missed a crucial element: addressing the root causes of the conflict between the two parties. Additionally, the absence of a comprehensive plan for implementation further weakened its chances of success. The Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement remains fragile, encountering political challenges in Israel even before it was fully enacted. Furthermore, the current deal does not address the underlying political issues at the heart of the conflict.

In addition, it is clear that while both parties agreed to sign the ceasefire, they were aware

that ensuring its sustainability and the full implementation of its terms was nearly impossible. The ceasefire was, in many ways, on borrowed time. U.S. envoy Witkoff, in blaming Hamas for allegedly rejecting the extension proposal—a claim Hamas denies—explicitly stated on March 14: “Hamas is making a very bad bet that time is on its side. It is not.” Hamas also seemed to have misjudged the political situation in Israel. It appears to have read too much into the internal fractures within the Israeli security establishment, including Netanyahu’s intention to dismiss the head of Israel’s internal security agency, Ronen Bar. Hamas likely saw these developments as signs that Gaza would be shielded from any immediate resumption of fighting due to divisions within the Israeli government.

It was not only Hamas that recognized the agreement’s unsustainability. Israelis also appeared to be buying time by shifting their offensive elsewhere. Just two days after the Gaza ceasefire came into effect, Israel launched a large-scale operation in the Jenin refugee camp, which later expanded to Tulkarem, Tubas, and other areas in the Occupied West Bank. Over the course of just four weeks, Israel’s military assault, which included airstrikes, ground incursions, and demolitions, resulted in the deaths of over 40 Palestinians, including a 2-year-old girl. Dozens of residential buildings were levelled, critical infrastructure was damaged, and at least 40,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced. While some ceasefires are partial, this situation is different because the West Bank was not part of the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza and was not included in the ceasefire agreement. Therefore, this redirection of Israeli military action was likely politically motivated, signalling that the war was far from over.

Conclusion

In conclusion, evaluating the success or failure of ceasefires requires a multidimensional approach that goes beyond the mere reduction or cessation of violence. While a decline in hostilities may be a visible indicator, it is not sufficient on its own—especially in conflicts where violence may be strategically resumed. The true measure of a ceasefire's outcome lies in whether the political objectives of the parties involved have been achieved. The case of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire illustrates this complexity. Although the ceasefire did not hold and the conflict resumed with intensity, it nonetheless served as a political and military gain for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, while representing a failure for Hamas. This underscores the relative nature of ceasefire success, which is inherently shaped by each party's strategic calculations.

Moreover, the roles of mediators, the presence or absence of enforceable guarantees, and the balance of power between the warring parties are critical in determining the durability and effectiveness of a ceasefire. In the Israel-Hamas case, the U.S. played a pivotal role as a mediator, yet the lack of concrete political guarantees and the significant power asymmetry between Hamas and the Israeli Defense Forces contributed to the fragility of the agreement. These dynamics suggest that the Israel-Hamas ceasefire was inherently unstable, shaped by deep-rooted political and historical complexities that make lasting peace especially difficult compared to other conflicts. Ultimately, ceasefires cannot be judged by a single metric; they must be understood within the broader context of political intent, strategic advantage, and the structure of the conflict itself.

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