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## Prospects for an Israel-Hamas Ceasefire

*By Damien D. Cheong*

### SYNOPSIS

*The prospects for a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas appear slim as recent events have hardened positions on both sides, making negotiations and compromise challenging. Breaking the deadlock requires an agreement that both sides can portray as a “victory”.*

### COMMENTARY

Ceasefire negotiations are expected to continue in Qatar despite Hamas' uncertain presence at the talks. A senior Hamas official said that it would “[not engage in negotiations](#)” for the sake of negotiations in order to provide cover for Israel to continue its war”. This is hardly surprising as recent events have hardened positions on both the Hamas and Israeli sides, making negotiations and compromise even more difficult.

#### Hardline Leaderships

On the Hamas side, the election of Yahya Sinwar as the new political bureau chief signals that the movement's approach will likely become more hardline. Sinwar, who is head of Hamas in Gaza and who Israel holds responsible for the October 7 attacks, is regarded as less pragmatic than his slain predecessor, Ismail Haniyeh. As such, he is expected to be [less conciliatory](#). Furthermore, Sinwar is said to be close to Iran, which could impact ceasefire negotiations if Hamas is given a role in Iranian plans to [retaliate](#) against Israel for Haniyeh's death on Iranian soil.

On the Israeli side, some of Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right coalition partners, such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, are vehemently opposed to a ceasefire agreement. They have called for [harsher measures](#), including “cutting off fuel and aid” to Gazans, to increase the pressure on Hamas. In fact, both men, who are national

security and finance ministers, respectively, have threatened to resign from the government if a ceasefire agreement is reached.

The killing of Haniyeh leaves the movement in the control of hardliners to deal with equally hardline interlocutors on the Israeli side, making dialogue and negotiations more daunting.

### **Mounting Fatalities and Injuries Harden Positions**

The mounting number of fatalities and injuries among the Palestinians in Gaza is likely to dampen Hamas' appetite to pursue a ceasefire or to moderate its demands. Even though reports show that Gazans are [angry](#) and blame Hamas for the state of affairs, [polls](#) conducted in June indicate that Hamas' standing amongst them has not diminished. Israel continues to be seen as the aggressor, and its continued attacks on Gaza civilians invariably lead to calls for revenge and perseverance in the fight.

Similarly, the deaths of hostages taken by Hamas on October 7 and sporadic rocket attacks since then against civilian targets in places like [Tel Aviv](#) have also hardened public opinion on the Israeli side. A recent [poll](#) shows that many Israelis want Benjamin Netanyahu to continue as Prime Minister and that his Likud party would win most seats in the Knesset if an election were held. The results contrasted with earlier polls where support for Netanyahu was very low, leading some observers to think he would be pressured into making a deal. Netanyahu has nevertheless stuck to his mantra that the war ends only when Hamas is [eliminated](#).

As both Hamas and the Israeli government appear to have the backing of their respective populace at this juncture, there is no motivation on both sides to compromise or move towards a ceasefire agreement. The world is likely to see the Israelis intensify their campaign in Gaza to destroy Hamas' leadership, infrastructure and military capabilities.

### **Allies' Counsel**

The influence of states that Hamas is close to and relies on could potentially influence Sinwar's calculations. The Qataris, for example, have been actively pushing Hamas to [accept](#) a ceasefire deal and reportedly threatened to evict Hamas leaders from their base in Qatar unless they showed "[more flexibility](#)" in the negotiations. Even if Qatar is not able to influence Sinwar, they could still work with other Hamas leaders to pressure him to be more conciliatory on the ceasefire terms. As noted earlier, Iran would have more influence over Hamas at this time.

The US, Israel's closest ally, wants a ceasefire. US officials have said that a ceasefire deal is more likely to result in the release of the remaining hostages than continuing the military pressure on Hamas. They [believe](#) that "Israel has achieved all it can in its military campaign against Hamas". Vice President and presidential hopeful Kamala Harris has also called for a ceasefire while decrying the loss of civilian lives in Gaza. However, the US is unlikely to sway Netanyahu, especially since his political fortunes have been revived. Furthermore, as Hamas is still capable of [attacks](#), there is no justification for stopping military operations, given his insistence on destroying the movement.

## “Victories” Needed on Both Sides

If talks are to progress and a deal reached, the terms of the agreement must allow both sides to portray the ceasefire as a “victory”. Some analysts had thought that Netanyahu could have capitalised on Haniyeh’s assassination by framing it as a significant strike against Hamas, making it “[politically feasible](#)” for him to agree to a ceasefire, but the window of opportunity has closed. Nevertheless, if the ceasefire agreement can result in a severely degraded Hamas, which “fundamentally [changes the strategic situation](#) politically, militarily, and economically”, Netanyahu could be more amenable to a ceasefire.

For Hamas, a “victory” would entail, as [Neomi Neumann](#) from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy suggests: (a) the movement’s survival, (b) continued rule over Gaza post-war, (c) rebuilding civilian and military infrastructure, and (d) managing resistance and public opinion. Converting to a political entity and giving up arms is not a consideration at this juncture.

As Israel and Hamas’ interpretations of victory are fundamentally at odds, an impasse is inevitable.

## Conclusion

The reality is that Hamas does not have many options or choices, and it should, therefore, actively participate in ceasefire talks. This is especially so if it wants to reserve a post-war authority role in Gaza. The killing of Haniyeh in Iran has hardened Tehran’s resolve to continue its rejection of making peace with Israel, and the present Hamas leadership has very limited room to manoeuvre. Nevertheless, the guile of diplomacy might deliver a reprieve.

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