



### Where Things Stand with the Gaza Ceasefire Deal as the First Phase Nears Its End

After a multi-day Israeli breach of the ongoing Gaza ceasefire deal that prompted fears regarding a possible resumption of the conflict, more than 600 Palestinian prisoners were eventually released on Thursday, in what amounts to the final exchange of hostages and prisoners agreed upon under phase one of the agreement. This past Saturday, Israel had been due to free the captives following Hamas' release of six Israeli hostages, however, Israel halted this at the last minute in a blatant violation of the deal's terms. The ceasefire agreement's first phase is now set to expire this weekend, and there is justifiable concern that Israel will resume the war if a second phase does not come into effect. Egypt has stated that the negotiations between Israel and Hamas on the next stage of the Gaza ceasefire deal have begun. Officials from Egypt, Qatar, and the United States are mediating the efforts aimed at progressing the agreement from phase one to phase two. The idea of extending the first phase has also been floated as a means of potentially maintaining the ceasefire deal for the time being while negotiations continue, but the talks themselves regarding the second phase are meant to bring about a permanent end to the war, which – if successful – would include the return of remaining hostages in Gaza and the full withdrawal of Israeli troops from the territory.

With the first phase of the Gaza ceasefire deal nearing its official end, the negotiating parties have clearly been behind schedule in initiating talks regarding phase two. Under the timeline for the agreement and its multiple stages, talks on the second phase of the deal were supposed to commence during the early days of February so that in an ideal scenario, phase two could begin seamlessly at the start of March. However, as we approach the end date of phase one this weekend, serious questions remain over whether or not talks will come to any fruition, or if hostilities in Gaza will resume instead. Analysts have drawn attention to the troubling predicament that Israel finds itself in, as on the one hand, there is a great deal of pressure from the families of hostages and much of the world at-large to proceed with the agreement but yet, on the other hand, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu risks seeing his coalition government collapse should the war not be resumed – as far-right extremist coalition members have threatened to quit if this scenario unfolds. Netanyahu's removal from power would also open him up to the serious domestic criminal corruption charges that he faces, not to mention the active arrest warrant at the hands of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In addition to violating the terms of the deal and risking its derailment via its multi-day delay in releasing Palestinian prisoners over the past week, Israel has also done so by stating that it would not withdraw as planned from the Philadelphi Corridor – the long strip of land bordering Egypt. Israel's military was supposed to begin pulling out of the corridor tomorrow on Saturday, and complete the process within eight days. On top of this, humanitarian agencies have highlighted that Israel is still obstructing the flow of aid into Gaza, even after the implementation of the ceasefire deal. For their part, Hamas has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to the continuation of the ceasefire agreement. Furthermore, they have called on the international community to put pressure on Israel in order to "immediately enter the second phase of the Gaza ceasefire agreement without any delay or hesitation."

One can draw a link between the Trump administration's biased pro-Israeli rhetoric and policies, and Israel seemingly being emboldened to engage in breaches of the ceasefire deal and other violations. As some

commentators have expressed, there is a clear sense that Netanyahu's government feels it has the unconditional backing of Trump for its bellicose actions in Gaza and elsewhere. The U.S. president has commented that "it is up to Israel to decide" whether or not it will uphold the truce and that he is "fine with any decision that Israel makes" regarding continuing the ceasefire or resuming its war. Amid the course of the fragile ceasefire, he has also lifted a previous Biden administration restriction that was imposed on the transfer of highly destructive MK-84 bombs to Israel. Rather than pressuring Israel to maintain the deal and abide by its agreed-upon terms, Trump is giving Israel the "green light" to act with impunity through the persistent flow of weapons despite evidence of Israeli war crimes and by failing to rebuke Israel for actions that jeopardize an already precarious ceasefire, like the one that took place last weekend – all to the detriment of peace and stability.