

INDICATOR BRIEF: ISRAEL-HAMAS CEASEFIRE

Event

On the 15th of January 2025, agreement on a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was announced. On the 17th of January, it was confirmed that both parties had signed the agreement in Doha, Qatar. The ceasefire, mediated by Egypt, Qatar, and the United States was announced to come into effect on the 19th of January 2025. The terms of the ceasefire were reported as follows:

1st Phase (42 days)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Suspension of hostilities. ▪ Israeli forces withdraw from populated areas to the border of the Gaza Strip. ▪ Fight restrictions for 10 hours a day (12 hours on days of hostage or prisoner exchanges). ▪ Return of displaced Palestinians in coordination with Israeli military withdrawal. ▪ Increased supply of humanitarian aid. ▪ Hamas conduct scheduled release of 33 hostages. Release to occur until week six (6) of the ceasefire. ▪ Israel to release all Palestinian women and children under 19 which were detained since 7th of October 2023. ▪ Negotiations to formalise conditions of Phase 2. To be completed by week five (5).
2nd Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Permanent ceasefire to take effect. ▪ Israeli Armed Forces to fully withdraw from the Gaza Strip. ▪ Further releases of hostages and prisoners.
Potential 3rd Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exchange of held deceased. ▪ Commencement of reconstruction plan for the Gaza Strip overseen by UN, Egypt, and Qatar. ▪ Border crossings open fully to allow for free flow of goods and people.

On the 16th of January, Israel stated that the agreement had not been finalised, that Hamas was allegedly demanding alterations to some of the terms, and that the Israeli cabinet had not voted on the ceasefire. On the morning of the 17th of January, it was announced that the cabinet vote would not take place until the 18th of January and that this could possibly delay the initial release of hostages and commencement of the ceasefire to the 20th of January 2025. This episode showcased once more the fragility of these negotiations and the challenges ahead in agreeing on the terms of phase 2.

Context

On the 7th of October 2023, Hamas launched an incursion into Israel, taking hostages and commencing renewed conflict between Hamas and Israel. The following day, the Israel Defence Forces engaged Hamas in the Gaza Strip in a sustained air campaign, followed by a ground incursion. Along with Hamas, the Iran-led 'Axis of Resistance' (including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi in Yemen, and Islamist militants in Iraq and Syria) launched attacks against Israel. As success in targeting Israel had a limited effect, the Houthi commenced operating against Israel-affiliated merchant shipping in the Red Sea with the seizure of the GALAXY LEADER on the 19th of November 2023. At the time of writing, the vessel remained detained off Ras Issa, Yemen. For the next 13 months, the Houthi targeted merchant shipping with increasingly loose ties to Israel – as well as US and UK owned shipping after joint US/UK airstrikes on Houthi positions – leading to the sinking of two vessels, along with several vessels sustaining various levels of damage, and the death of four mariners.

Analysis

The ceasefire agreement does not provision for the removal of Hamas as a political/military force in the Gaza Strip. Hamas can propagate the ceasefire as a victory. Israel on the other hand must come to terms with the realisation that military force alone could not eradicate a paramilitary group such as Hamas. It is likely that the stagnating nature of the Gaza operations in combination with the increased pressure from the US (both by the outgoing Biden administration and representatives of President-Elect Trump) led to Israel's acceptance of a ceasefire falling short of the fulfilment of Israel's declared war aims in the Gaza Strip. With the fall of the Syrian Assad-regime and the lasting ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, the 'Axis of Resistance' is assessed to have recognised a necessity of suspension of hostilities to regroup. Thus, it is assessed likely the ceasefire will not be violated by Hamas, though individuals or one of the numerous smaller militant groups in the Gaza Strip may act

against the agreement outside of the control of Hamas. Israel, however, has achieved unforeseen military success in this multi-front conflict. Right-wing elements of the Israeli establishment have proclaimed that Israel had a 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity to re-define the security construct of the Middle East. For Israel to refrain from resuming combat operations in response to minor violations of the ceasefire, the incoming Trump administration will have to maintain an elevated level of diplomatic pressure on Israel. Yet indications are, that a Trump administration would retroactively approve renewed Israeli military action. As the second phase of the ceasefire remains to be negotiated, a lasting suspension of combat continues to be a fragile proposition.

Implications

The security of future transits through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait or destined for Eilat, Israel, will, however, rely on the Houthi stepping down from their offensive stance against Israel, which has been closely linked to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas.

The leader of the Houthi movement, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, stated in a speech on the 16th of January 2025 that the Houthi "military operations will continue in support of the Palestinian people if the Israeli enemy continues the massacres of genocide and escalation before implementing the agreement" and that the group "will remain in line with the stages of implementing the agreement". He added that any breach of the of the agreement by Israel would be met with immediate military support.

Public figures of the Houthi movement have published statements on social media. They offer little clarity on the Houthi's intentions and willingness to abide by the ceasefire upon its commencement. Senior member of the Supreme Political Council, Mohammed al-Houthi, stated that the Houthi would wait for "the word of the leader [Abdul-Malik al-Houthi]" as they did "not need to give and take positions before that." In a separate post, he said that the Houthi would "abide by any decisions made by the resistance in Gaza." A spokesperson of the Houthi movement, Mohammed Abdul Salam, stated that the "battle [was] reaching its conclusion with the declaration of a ceasefire in Gaza", though he did not offer any indication for how the Houthi would conduct themselves during the initial phase of the implementation of the ceasefire.

Ambrey assesses the Houthi actions will continue while Israeli military forces operate within the Strip. Yet, due to a reduced availability of suitable targets it may appear as if the Houthi have ceased their offensive operations against merchant shipping. This should not be mistaken for a complete halt of hostilities. The implementation of phase 2 of the ceasefire is assessed to likely offer the grounds for the Houthi to officially end their actions against Israel, the US, UK, and their merchant fleets, though it is almost certain the group will reserve a right to resume attacks should it deem this necessary.

Additionally, a resurgence of the Yemeni Civil War remains possible, which could lead to a change in intent, targeting coalition shipping instead of Israel-affiliated vessels. The US is reportedly attempting to garner intelligence support of Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognised Government of Yemen to increase the effectiveness of US airstrikes against the Houthi. The Houthi have repeatedly warned Saudi Arabia not to intervene against the Houthi's attacks on Israel. Any active support of US airstrikes in northwest Yemen may be construed as a direct attack against the Houthi and a revival of the Yemeni Civil War. Renewed clashes in Taiz in December 2024 did not lead to an escalation of the internal conflict yet indicated the fragility of the unofficial ceasefire.

The Houthi have constituted a threat to the maritime domain for the overwhelming majority of the past seven years. This threat started with attacks on Saudi Arabian vessels at part of the Saudi Arabian engagement in the Yemen Civil War. After the expiry of the ceasefire in Yemen the Houthi engaged the internationally recognised Government's attempts to export oil products by targeting oil export infrastructure during the presence of merchant vessels. Most recently, the Houthi targeted Israel-affiliated, US-and UK-owned shipping for more than a year. It is likely the Houthi will continue to pose a latent threat to the maritime domain as tensions in the Middle East will persist.

Provided the ceasefire holds, and the Houthi signal their intent to honour it, a return of shipping to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait will occur gradually. Ambrey will continue to provide Ambrey Vessel Affiliation Checks based on evidenced intent and action for stakeholders to have a clearer understanding of the risk associated with an individual vessel transiting the area in the months following the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.