



Tentative Steps Toward a Gaza Ceasefire: Key Developments and Ongoing Challenges

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Ongoing hostilities in Gaza continue to test the feasibility of a negotiated ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Diplomatic efforts by Egypt, Qatar, and the United States have reportedly narrowed some of the gaps that have stalled progress for months, particularly around prisoners and hostages, humanitarian access, and the immediate governance of Gaza. Yet, despite these signs of forward movement, multiple core issues remain unresolved, and violence on the ground undermines the fragile hope for a lasting truce.

Evolving Ceasefire Proposals and Core Disagreements

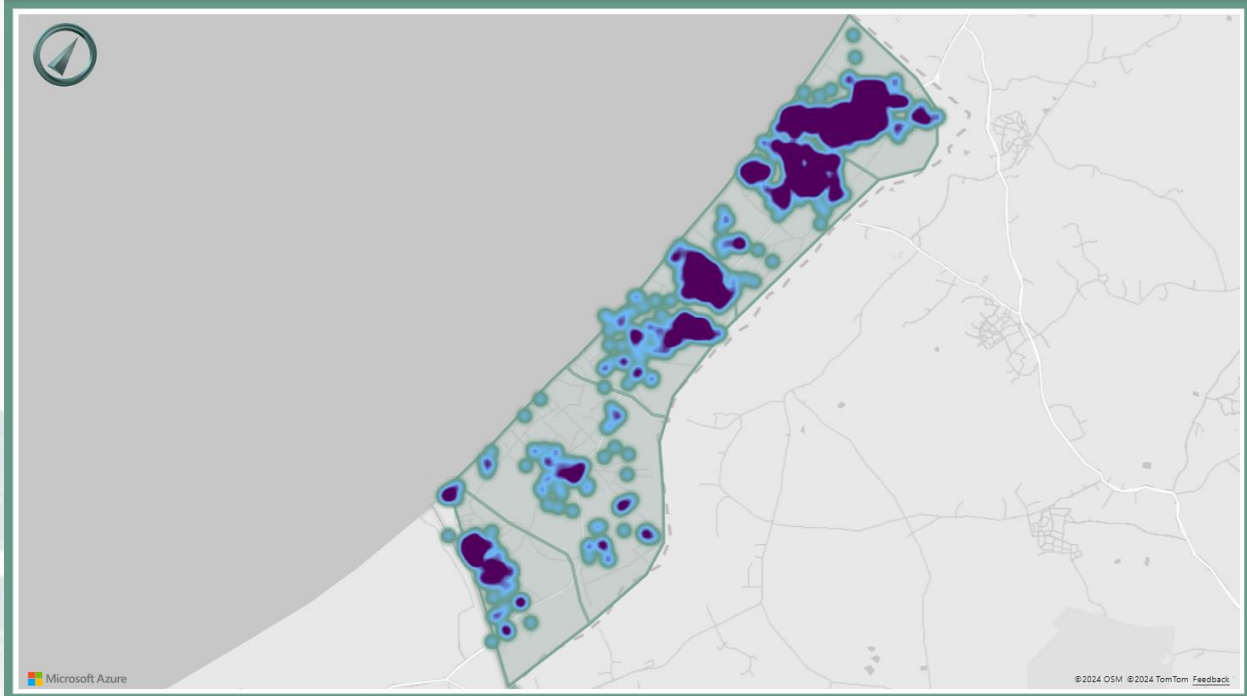
Diplomatic efforts involving Egypt, Qatar, and the United States have attempted to forge a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, focusing on issues such as prisoner exchanges, humanitarian access, and Gaza's post-conflict governance. An Israeli intelligence envoy in Doha has reportedly brought the parties closer to consensus on a few points, yet critical disagreements remain. One prominent proposal centers on reopening the Rafah Crossing under the 2005 agreement with EU oversight. This measure would give Gazans a much-needed southern corridor, but there is lingering uncertainty over how Palestinian staff at the crossing will be managed and whether they will be officially affiliated with the Palestinian Authority.

A second major proposal concerns the proposed Israeli withdrawal from the Netzarim Axis, which could theoretically allow thousands of displaced families to return to their homes. That plan hinges on the introduction of an Arab party to conduct vehicle inspections, although any perceived partiality could reignite long-standing tensions. The prisoner exchange itself remains a pivotal flashpoint. Israel insists on including eleven male hostages in an initial phase but continues to block the release of Palestinian detainees it labels as "dangerous." Hamas seeks broader concessions, leveraging five female Israeli soldiers in its custody. Beyond these, a 45-day humanitarian truce has been tabled to facilitate aid, but the fragility of the situation casts doubt on whether such a pause can hold.



Intensifying Military Incidents in Parallel

Despite the ongoing talks, the ground situation in Gaza reflects a marked escalation in hostilities, encompassing aerial bombings, drone attacks, and extensive ground operations.



Heatmap of incidents recorded between November 28 and December 22 in Gaza

In northern Gaza, repeated Israeli Armed Forces tank and artillery shelling has targeted areas south of Beit Lahia, inflicting significant destruction and leading to numerous civilian casualties. Strikes on Sheikh Zayed, the Beit Lahia Project area, and widespread drone deployments in Jabalia Camp, including Jabalia An-Nazla, highlight the pervasiveness of fighting. Medical facilities near these zones, notably Kamal Adwan Hospital, have endured multiple drone strikes, severely undermining civilian access to healthcare. The frequent shelling of residential blocks and schools, such as Awni Al-Hirthani School, has prompted widespread displacement and deepened the humanitarian crisis.

In Gaza City, Israeli ground incursions persist south of the city, including the former Netzarim settlement and east of the Az-Zaitoun neighborhood. These incursions often coincide with aerial bombings and helicopter attacks in districts like Ash-Shuja'iyya, Tal Al-Hawa, As-Sabra, and Ash-Sheikh Radwan. Entire apartment complexes have been leveled, and civilian casualties are routinely reported. Repeated strikes on hospitals—Al-Ahli Hospital among them—compound the crisis, while residential neighborhoods such as An-Nasser and Ad-Daraj have repeatedly come under fire. Stray bullets have entered humanitarian agencies' premises, underscoring the risks that relief workers face and the chaos that continues to unfold.



Central Gaza, including areas around An-Nuseirat Camp, Al-Bureij Camp, and Al-Maghazi Camp, has witnessed intense tank shelling and airstrikes. These attacks have sometimes resulted in double-digit fatalities in a single incident. The Israeli Armed Forces have repeatedly struck residential high-rises, including Al-Mustaqbal Tower and An-Nazra Tower, leaving not just immediate casualties but also extensive infrastructure damage that impedes both evacuation and aid delivery. Hijackings of UN or NGO supply trucks, as well as looting by armed groups, have stymied relief efforts, with armed criminals sometimes forcing drivers to offload desperately needed supplies. This environment of both violent conflict and opportunistic criminality creates an unpredictable and frequently hazardous context for humanitarian responders.

Southern Gaza, particularly Khan Yunis (Al-Fukhari, Abasan) and Rafah (As-Salam, Al-Junina, Tibbet Al-Zaraa, Ash-Shaboura Camp), remains under ongoing pressure from Israeli incursions and air campaigns. Ground forces operate in Ash-Shoka near the Rafah crossing and Philadelphi corridor, where repeated clashes have taken place with non-state armed actors firing rockets and anti-tank missiles. Helicopter gunships have bombed both urban and rural locales, reducing tents and homes to rubble in areas like Al-Mawasi and Khirbet Al-Adas. Significant civilian casualties have resulted from such strikes, especially when they occur during distributions of aid or when residents gather to collect essentials. UN convoys have been hijacked on arterial roads such as Salah ad-Din, and relief trucks transporting flour, medicine, or diesel have been intercepted or looted by armed men. Such disruptions prolong the already acute humanitarian emergency by preventing resources from reaching those in need.

Effects on Humanitarian Agencies and Civilian Populations

The cumulative impact of these incursions, drone strikes, and hijackings poses a severe challenge for humanitarian organizations trying to deliver aid, maintain medical services, and offer basic support to the displaced. Strikes on hospitals—like Kamal Adwan Hospital, Al-Awda Hospital, and Al-Ahli Hospital—compromise not only patient care but also the safety of medical personnel. Repeated shelling of UNRWA schools, some designated as temporary shelters for internally displaced persons, magnifies the vulnerability of civilians who believed these locations to be safe havens. Aid convoys have been hijacked or forced to stop, their drivers often threatened or assaulted, and crucial cargo such as flour, diesel, and medical supplies stolen. Families attempting to flee risk crossing active combat zones, uncertain whether corridors will remain open from one hour to the next. Humanitarian agencies face immense security risks and must coordinate intensively with relevant stakeholders to negotiate access and ensure safer operations. Even so, the unpredictability of ground clashes, the possibility of airstrikes at any moment, and the opportunistic actions of armed criminals generate a climate of perpetual insecurity, forcing NGOs to modify or halt operations.



The prolonged violence has also contributed to a rising civilian death toll, further displacement, and the near-collapse of essential services in many areas, despite the reported progress in the ceasefire negotiations. Families often find themselves repeatedly uprooted as hostilities spread to multiple districts. People living in neighborhoods initially considered safe could lose their homes within days due to newly intensified shelling or air raids. Water networks, sanitation facilities, and electrical grids have suffered major damage, undermining efforts by NGOs and municipal teams to maintain even minimal levels of public health. Meanwhile, medical facilities function with limited staff and supplies, as their personnel struggle to reach workplaces or are themselves affected by the strikes. Psychological distress among the population runs high, with children in particular experiencing lasting trauma from repeated explosions, loss of relatives, and the experience of sheltering in damaged buildings or uncertain UNRWA safe points.

Outlook for the Ceasefire

Although negotiation progress has been reported—especially concerning the Rafah Crossing and potential Israeli withdrawal from the Netzarim Axis—the persistent scale of violence calls the feasibility of any ceasefire into question. The 45-day humanitarian truce, intended to allow a pause for aid deliveries, rests on strict compliance by all parties. Even minor or localized provocations in an environment saturated with drone strikes, artillery shelling, and near-constant ground clashes could unravel the fragile gains. Both Israel and Hamas face internal pressures: Israeli decision-makers remain determined to keep Hamas from consolidating administrative control post-truce, while Hamas must demonstrate that its negotiations yield tangible benefits for Gaza’s population and address Palestinian prisoners’ concerns.

If properly implemented, the reopening of the Rafah Crossing under EU monitoring and the withdrawal from strategic areas like Netzarim could alleviate immediate suffering and mark a step toward lasting confidence-building. However, each agreement component faces potential breakdowns on the ground. Escalatory violence in places such as Jabalia Camp, Beit Lahia, and central Gaza underscores the difficulty of ensuring safe humanitarian corridors. Hijacking of UN or NGO supply vehicles also highlights the need for comprehensive security arrangements that address not only the combatants but also local criminal elements. In the absence of stable governance and strong oversight, the risk of renewed or continuing violence remains extremely high.

Ultimately, success will depend on whether the parties—despite their mutual suspicion and differing objectives—can sustain a halt to active hostilities long enough to build momentum toward a broader political solution. The humanitarian agencies, caught in the crossfire, will continue grappling with the immense logistical and security burdens of delivering aid under persistent conflict. Without a cohesive framework that guarantees unhindered access, reliable monitoring, and accountability measures for violations, any ceasefire, even if it offers temporary relief, may quickly give way to another cycle of escalation.



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