

Analysis | Forced to Accept Terms, Hamas Hopes Prisoners' Release Will Offset Gaza Devastation

Thursday 16 January 2025, by [KHOURY Jack](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2025).

The humanitarian crisis, the Israel-Hezbollah cease-fire and Trump's inauguration are all prompting Hamas to free hostages without ending the war. But signing the deal won't be the end of the story - Hamas will have to justify this year of suffering to the Palestinian people

Devastation in the Gaza Strip earlier this week. Credit: Eyad Baba/AFP

The anticipated announcement of a cease-fire and of a hostage-release-deal will leave Hamas to address several issues regarding the war and its effects on Gaza in particular, and on the future of the Palestinian question in general.

Hamas will try to portray the release of [numerous Palestinian prisoners](#), some convicted of the most serious crimes, as a success. It will also try to show that despite suffering major blows, it is still a dominant player in the Palestinian struggle.

After the [cease-fire](#), Hamas will demand to be an active part in running Gaza, even if only indirectly. To accomplish this, it will make the most of the wide support it still enjoys in Palestinian society.

But after many months of combat, Hamas' mere intention to sign the deal shows it feels compelled to accept terms that it previously saw as non-negotiable.

First and foremost, Hamas backed down from its demand for a total end to the war and a total Israeli withdrawal from Gaza at the time of signing.

IDF troops in Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, earlier this month. Credit: Moti Milrod

Second, Hamas also gave up on its demand that Israel release certain well-known Palestinian prisoners, at least in the first phase of the deal. Such figures include Fatah official and head of the armed wing Tanzim, [Marwan Barghouti](#), and Ahmad Saadat, secretary general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, as well as other top military figures from Hamas and [Islamic Jihad](#).

Hamas says that these points of dispute, primarily ending the war and the IDF's withdrawal from the Strip, together with the release of senior prisoners, will be brought up in the second and third phases of the deal. The organization's representatives received guarantees from the mediators that the negotiations on these issues will proceed without delay.

Hamas adds that this newfound flexibility, which it stresses isn't a sign of concession nor of surrender, is due to several reasons.

One reason is Gaza's [humanitarian catastrophe](#), which is worsening by the day. Even Gazans who support Hamas are pressuring it to end the war because of the Strip's near-total destruction, along with the hunger, disease and emotional damage, which will also be felt in Gaza for generations to come.

Another reason is Hamas' geopolitical isolation following [the cease-fire](#) between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, together with Lebanon's intention to deploy its army in the south of the country in place of Hezbollah, combined with the developments in [Syria](#). Despite [the Houthis'](#) continued missile and drone launches at Israel, Hamas feels it cannot strategically rely on them for military support.

Destroyed villages along Lebanon's border with Israel, last year. Credit: Gil Eliyahu

And whether Hamas admits it or not, the third reason for their leniency is [President-elect Donald Trump's](#) imminent inauguration.

Trump is highly unpredictable and surrounded by a team [so adamant in their support for Israel](#) that they might as well administer the West Bank settlements themselves.

Coincidentally, Trump's threats to "[unleash hell](#)" in Gaza if the hostages are not released seem to hold less sway over Hamas than the pressure the incoming president could apply on countries like Qatar and Turkey, where Hamas leaders and activists reside.

[The hostage card](#) is also gradually losing its power. The severe danger to their lives, and the realization that the price Hamas can secure in exchange for dead hostages will be much lower than the price for living hostages, is also prompting Hamas to close a deal, even if only a partial one.

It's important to note, however, that the emerging deal does not mean that [the Palestinian Authority](#) now possesses any advantage over Hamas. For the moment, the PA isn't taking any initiative to influence developments in Gaza.

Rather, it has decided to stand idle for the time being. Its hope is that the Trump administration, with encouragement from world leaders (Arabs and non-Arabs alike), will try to implement an outline to instill the PA back in Gaza.

An officer from the Palestinian Authority during a major raid against militants in the Jenin refugee camp in the Israeli-occupied northern West Bank, in December. Credit: Majdi Mohammed/AP

However, the PA is well aware that it cannot [rehabilitate Gaza](#) without coordinated international help and an economic safety net. Just the first phases of reconstruction will cost tens of billions of dollars, funds that currently appear to be directed at Syria and Lebanon.

Moreover, the Israeli government is trying to prevent the PA's return to Gaza. [It hopes to see the PA disbanded completely](#), or at most turned into a minor municipal authority, running no more than a few cities in the West Bank.

For both Hamas and the PA, a cease-fire deal won't be the end of the story. Both will have to provide the Palestinian people with tangible answers about their future, rather than batting around hollow slogans.

Jack Khoury

P.S.

- Haaretz. Jan 15, 2025:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-01-15/ty-article/.premium/forced-to-accept-terms-hamas-hopes-prisoners-release-will-offset-gaza-devastation/00000194-6959-db3b-a19c-7fdb7010000>

- Jack Khoury's articles in the Haaretz:

<https://www.haaretz.com/ty-WRITER/0000017f-da24-d938-a17f-fe2eb16e0000>