

Opinion - Gaza

Make no mistake: Israel's far right is planning for a Gaza without Palestinians

Tuesday 28 January 2025, by [REIFF Ben](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2025).

Despite the ceasefire, Benjamin Netanyahu is capitulating to extremists who have no problem with ethnic cleansing. And they've found an ally in Donald Trump

Benjamin Netanyahu and Bezael Smotrich at a cabinet meeting at the defence ministry in Tel Aviv, 7 January 2024. Photograph: Ronen Zvulun/Reuters

The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas has now entered its second week. Over the past two weekends, Hamas has handed over seven [Israeli hostages](#) in exchange for the release of nearly 300 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, and preparations are already under way for a double exchange next weekend. But it hasn't been without hitches.

Two days in, Israeli soldiers opened fire on Palestinian civilians as they sought to return to their homes near Gaza's southern border, [killing](#) a child. This weekend, Hamas opted to release only soldiers, despite having agreed to first release all remaining civilian women and children. Israeli forces then delayed the return of hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians to [northern Gaza](#), while Hamas dragged its feet on informing Israel how many of the remaining hostages to be exchanged were alive or dead.

For the most part, these violations have been [swiftly resolved](#). But there should be no illusions about where this deal is heading. Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, does not intend to see it through to a permanent ceasefire; nor does he intend to fully withdraw Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip. And Donald Trump, whom many were quick to credit with forcing Netanyahu to agree to a ceasefire in the first place, won't stop him torpedoing it either.

First, some context. To those paying attention, it is fairly indisputable that Netanyahu has deliberately obstructed negotiations for a ceasefire in Gaza over the past year. He is accused of delaying negotiating summits, [leaking classified information](#) from the talks to the press, bypassing the war cabinet to minimise the mandate of Israeli negotiators, reneging on agreements made during cabinet meetings, invading Gaza's last civilian bastion, Rafah, when a deal was on the table, inflating the gaps between Israel's and Hamas's positions and arbitrarily [adding](#) new "red lines" after Hamas had accepted Israel's previous terms. Now that he has eventually agreed to a ceasefire - whether due to [pressure from Trump](#) or [his own political calculations](#) - the families of Israeli hostages [fear](#) that Netanyahu could forsake their loved ones in order to resume the war.

They have good reason to be fearful. Even before the Israeli government officially approved the ceasefire deal on 18 January, reports emerged that cast doubt on Netanyahu's commitment to its full realisation. The prime minister had apparently [agreed to the demand](#) of Israel's far-right finance minister, Bezael Smotrich, that fighting resume after the first of the ceasefire's three phases elapsed. Although Netanyahu refrained from admitting this publicly, [sources present in those](#)

[discussions](#) as well as [journalists close to Netanyahu](#) stressed that the chances of the deal reaching its second phase are close to zero.

Why did Netanyahu seemingly capitulate to Smotrich? For the same reason that he was reluctant to agree to a ceasefire in the first place: Smotrich was threatening to topple the government. After Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right national security minister, pulled his party out of the governing coalition in response to the deal's approval by Israel's security cabinet, Netanyahu was left with a razor-thin majority in parliament.

Recent polls overwhelmingly suggest that the prime minister would have difficulty returning to power if elections were held today. So his political survival - and his ability to fend off [the completion of his corruption](#) trial and [accountability for possible failings](#) in the lead-up to the 7 October attack - now rests in the hands of a man whose vision for Gaza is one of permanent Israeli control and the [ethnic cleansing](#) of Palestinians.

In that ambition, Smotrich seems to [have found an ally](#) in the new occupant of the White House. "You're talking about probably a million and a half people, and we just clean out that whole thing and say: 'You know, it's over'," Trump [told reporters](#) over the weekend, suggesting that residents of Gaza could be permanently relocated to Egypt or Jordan. According to [senior Israeli officials](#), this was no slip of the tongue. Indeed, some reports suggest that Netanyahu [views the idea favourably](#), and a Trump transition official has already [floated](#) the possibility of temporarily relocating people from Gaza to Indonesia.

Two Palestinians hug as displaced people make their way back to their homes in Gaza City, amid a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, 27 January 2025. Photograph: Mahmoud Issa/Reuters

Trump has been largely noncommittal on the deal itself. On his inauguration day, he [admitted](#) he was "not confident" that it would hold, adding that "it's not our war, it's their war". Netanyahu himself [claims](#) to have received assurances from Trump and Joe Biden that the US would give Israel its full backing to resume its onslaught on Gaza should negotiations break down ahead of the second phase (Trump's new Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, [refused](#) to confirm or deny this).

Trump has also [resumed](#) the supply of 2,000lb bombs to Israel that the Biden administration paused over concerns about how they were being used in Gaza. Meanwhile, Trump's choice for ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, has previously [expressed](#) the view that "there's really no such thing as a Palestinian". This is the man many are expecting to compel Netanyahu to stick with the ceasefire and enable Gaza's reconstruction under Palestinian self-rule.

On 3 February, negotiators from Israel and Hamas are due to start ironing out details ahead of the second phase of the ceasefire. This will present Netanyahu with the perfect opportunity to collapse the talks, blame Hamas, and resume the war should he so choose. The international community, which stood by for 15 months as Israel pulverised [Gaza](#) and its inhabitants, must leverage every tool in its arsenal to ensure that the agreement holds.

Last week, Netanyahu [renege](#)d on his government's commitment to withdraw Israeli forces from Lebanon within 60 days, although he put the blame in Lebanon's court. There appears to be very little stopping him from doing the same, and worse, in Gaza. The consequences for two million Palestinians who are only just beginning to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives would be devastating.

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P.S.

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