



Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire

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Principal Findings

What's new? For the first time since the 2014 war, a plan for a long-term ceasefire between Hamas and Israel started to take hold in early November, only to be disrupted by the largest escalation in over four years. The ceasefire has been restored, but it remains fragile.

Why does it matter? Sporadic escalations between Israel and Hamas since 2007 have claimed the lives of thousands of Palestinians and tens of Israelis. Coupled with an Israeli/Egyptian blockade on Gaza, the conflict is causing widespread suffering among the strip's two million Palestinians. The current ceasefire offers a pathway to breaking this deadlock.

What should be done? Hamas should keep curbing protests and attacks from Gaza; Egypt and Israel should greatly relax the strip's closure; and donors should quickly supply Gazans with clean water, electricity and sanitation. Meanwhile, international stakeholders should press Israel, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt to uphold the ceasefire in all its phases.

Executive Summary

Brief but violent, the 11-13 November escalation between Israel and Hamas was a potent reminder of their relationship's volatility. That it came against the backdrop of an apparent breakthrough in indirect negotiations to reach a ceasefire was particularly telling: it suggested that a seemingly minor incident could quickly snowball despite the two protagonists' contrary wishes. As Hamas resumes its effort to restrain armed operations, Israel and Egypt must act urgently to carry out their responsibilities under the terms of the understanding that was reached and work to alleviate the suffering in the Gaza Strip that too often is a proximate cause of violence. Experience shows that after the parties have secured an initial calm, the impetus for Israel and Egypt to pursue lasting stability fades. Such a failure at this time might very well lead to another escalation that could spiral into war.

In the first week of November, Hamas and Israel began implementing the ceasefire agreement that they had been indirectly negotiating since the early summer, with Egyptian and UN mediation. The agreement is set to advance in three stages. The first entails the general amelioration of the dynamic between Israel and Hamas, which, unchanged, holds the potential to lead both parties into an inadvertent escalation. Once they achieve relative quiet, the parties reportedly are to move to subsequent phases, which involve efforts at more permanent stabilisation of the Gaza Strip, reconstruction and reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), resulting in re-unification of Gaza and the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority (PA), which governs Palestinian-run areas of the West Bank.

On 11 November, less than 72 hours after the ceasefire appeared to be taking effect, hopes that the actors were moving toward a more lasting calm were dashed. Hamas's security forces spotted and confronted an undercover Israeli operation within the Gaza Strip, leading to exchanges of fire that threatened to expand into all-out war. The parties have since stepped back and reaffirmed their commitment to the ceasefire agreement. Still, the deep distrust between the parties, and the precarious domestic position of each, underscore the fragility of the truce.

What is required now is for Hamas to maintain its grip on popular protests in Gaza, while Israel and Egypt resume meeting their ceasefire commitments: relaxing the restrictions imposed on Gaza through sustaining the inflow of fuel and funds; increasing the number of Gazans who are able to travel in and out of Israel through the Erez crossing and Egypt through the Rafah border; and expanding the type of imports and volume of exports from the strip. Once these measures have stabilised Gaza, the parties should then turn to the more substantive issues related to reconstruction and reconciliation. No one should take an initial calm as an indication that the ceasefire has succeeded: all should make sustained efforts to implement the agreement's stages to fend off the threat of war.

Gaza City/Jerusalem/Ramallah/Brussels, 16 November 2018

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire

I. Introduction

Hamas and Israel have been engaged in indirect ceasefire negotiations since the end of the official period of the Great March of Return on 15 May 2018. Every 15 May is Nakba Day, when Palestinians commemorate their expulsion and flight from their homes during the 1947-1949 war. The 2018 marches were initially planned and launched through a civil society initiative calling for the right of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to homes from which they had fled or been expelled, now within Israel. These “1948 refugees” comprise about two thirds of Gaza’s population of approximately two million. The Israeli army met the marchers, who were predominantly unarmed, with a show of force. Israel relied primarily on snipers positioned within its borders to shoot at protesters, most of whom presented no risk to Israeli soldiers. Since the beginning of the protests, on 30 March, more than 214 Palestinians have been killed and close to 18,000 injured. One Israeli soldier has also been killed by Palestinian gunfire.¹

Hamas had given the initial approval for the protests to proceed, and its role in managing the scale and form of the ensuing demonstrations gradually expanded.² Hamas provided much of the infrastructure needed to ensure the longevity of the demonstrations, including publicising the protest dates; transporting people to and from the protest sites; scheduling activities and providing areas for families to congregate, for people to pray and for youth to play soccer in the fields surrounding the protest sites; giving rally speeches by Hamas’s leaders; and coordinating tactics to be used by the protesters.³ These tactics increasingly entailed the use of home-manufactured flammable devices that have wrought damage in surrounding Israeli farmlands, as well as explosive devices aimed at breaching the fence separating Israel from the Gaza Strip.⁴

Over the duration of the official protest period, from March until May, Hamas and other factions within the Gaza Strip mostly abided by civil society’s call for the protests to be peaceful, hoping that the image of marchers calling for rights might rally world opinion in their favour. No rocket fire from the Gaza Strip was recorded during this time, despite Israel’s militarised response, which caused heavy casualties among the marchers and targeted Hamas sites throughout Gaza.⁵

¹ For full reporting, see the daily updated timeline: “Gaza Protests: All the Latest Updates”, Al Jazeera, 12 November 2018.

² For more background, see Nathan Thrall, “Deadly Day in Gaza Won’t Be the Last”, Crisis Group Commentary, 15 May 2018; and, “Gaza Protests Mark Shift in Palestinian National Consciousness”, Crisis Group Commentary, 2 April 2018.

³ David M. Halbfinger, Iyad Abuheweila and Jugal K. Patel, “300 meters in Gaza: Snipers, burning tires and a contested fence”, *The New York Times*, 15 May 2018.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 4 July 2018.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders, Gaza City, May-July 2018.

Since May, given the inability of the protests to secure real change on the ground, Hamas has reverted to its strategy – developed after Israel imposed its blockade on the Gaza Strip in 2007 – of using force to pressure Israel into concessions. The movement, alongside Islamic Jihad, began responding to Israeli attacks on its military personnel or posts within Gaza with rocket fire, seeking to rebuild deterrence.⁶ In response, and as the protests persisted, Israel threatened to expand its operations as it withheld the flow of fuel and funds that Qatar had made available to Gaza, exacerbating the coastal enclave’s electricity crisis.⁷ A familiar war of attrition over the course of the summer threatened to spill over into a wider escalation.

This report examines the strategic and political calculations underpinning the recurrent hostilities in and around the Gaza Strip, both to understand why fighting erupted again in early November and to demonstrate why, if the conflict dynamic remains the same, a ceasefire is unlikely to hold. It then argues for ways to change the dynamic so that the parties may forge a durable truce. The report is based on dozens of interviews with Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Palestinian Authority (PA) leaders, Israeli officials and ordinary Gazans, as well as on-the-ground observations in the Gaza Strip before and during the recent escalation.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Lieberman orders fuel transfer to Gaza power plant halted over border violence”, *Times of Israel*, 12 October 2018. For other examples of Israel tightening the blockade to pressure Hamas, see Itamar Eichner, “Bennett, Eisenkot go head-to-head over IDF’s Gaza policy”, *Ynet News*, 16 July 2018; “Minister calls for targeted killings of Gaza kite bombers, Hamas leaders”, *Times of Israel*, 5 June 2018; “Israel closes Gaza goods crossing over Palestinian arson kites”, Agence France Presse (AFP), 9 July 2018.

II. The Post-2007 Deadlock

Apart from the novelty of the Great March of Return, a dynamic of tit-for-tat skirmishes between the two parties has taken root since 2007. Hamas uses various means at its disposal, including rockets, to pressure Israel into easing the restrictions on access to the Gaza Strip. Israel in turn uses the blockade and its military power to force Hamas into “calm”, to ensure that southern villages around Gaza’s periphery experience no disruption to daily life.⁸ Hamas insists that there can be no calm without lifting the blockade, and it sees no reason to restrain popular protests or its rocket attacks for a mere return to the misery that has long pervaded Gaza.⁹

But neither peaceful protest nor Hamas’s militarised responses are likely to compel Israel to remove the blockade of the Gaza Strip in the manner envisioned by Hamas.¹⁰ Successive Israeli governments under Benjamin Netanyahu’s premiership have instead relied on the incremental but insufficient easing of access restrictions to Gaza to quell unrest, while avoiding measures that would genuinely address Gaza’s humanitarian and economic suffering, despite recommendations from Israel’s security establishment to do just that.¹¹

Exchanges on the battlefield typically have informed the manner in which ceasefire negotiations have unfolded. Both parties pursue short-term gains (calm for Israelis vs. greater freedom of movement and easing of restrictions for Gazans) while avoiding longer-term concessions, such as a full end to the blockade and a long-term Gaza and West Bank ceasefire between Israel and a unified Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that includes all Palestinian factions. While both parties seek to calibrate their skirmishes to meet their short-term goals, they risk an escalation that neither side desires. Indeed, Hamas continues to be financially strapped and in an increasingly precarious position within the Gaza Strip, where rising hardships have led to soaring popular resentment of the movement’s governance.¹² Given the level of degradation in Gaza, resulting from the blockade and the previous military operations that Israel has carried out, another major escalation could result in the greatest humanitarian crisis the coastal enclave has yet seen. For Hamas, that outcome would be perilous.

For its part, Israel remains without an exit strategy should it decide to reconquer Gaza, and much of its security establishment maintains that continued Hamas rule is the least bad of the available options.¹³ Under Netanyahu’s leadership, Israel is deeply reluctant to expend the resources and to put at risk the lives of its citizens and soldiers that an expansive operation in Gaza would entail, despite pressure from right-wing

⁸ Tareq Baconi, “Gaza’s Status Quo Unlikely to Change”, Palestine Square (Institute for Palestine Studies), 22 October 2018.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former Hamas minister, Hamas spokesperson, Hamas senior leaders, Gaza City, June-July 2018.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, 10 July 2018.

¹¹ See Israel’s State Comptroller’s report following the 2014 Operation Protective Edge; and Emma Graham-Harrison, “Netanyahu criticised in damning report on 2014 Gaza war”, *The Guardian*, 28 February 2017.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, residents, Gaza, June-October 2018.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli security official, Tel Aviv, November 2018.

leaders such as (now former) Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Education Minister Naftali Bennett to pursue a tougher line against Hamas.¹⁴ Israel's optimal outcome appears to be to maintain the separation of Gaza from the rest of the Palestinian territories in a manner that ensures minimal security challenges for its citizens.¹⁵ In the absence of Gaza's reconquest by Israel, some form of truce with Hamas – a party that has proven increasingly adept at managing armed groups in the strip – is central to this goal. At the end of October, Netanyahu indicated that Israel had no desire to “topple Hamas” in Gaza, even in the event of another escalation.¹⁶

In other words, both parties are prepared to use force to achieve immediate objectives, neither desires all-out war and the two share the implicit goal of stabilising the Gaza Strip under Hamas's rule – albeit in Israel's but not Hamas's case, without allowing the Islamist movement to showcase an ability to govern. This reality has informed the nature of the indirect ceasefire negotiations that have taken place against the backdrop of the Great Return marches. From Israel's perspective, the key challenge is to balance Gaza's humanitarian needs against the risk of empowering Hamas and thereby indirectly weakening the PA in the West Bank, with its ailing and increasingly isolated president, Mahmoud Abbas.¹⁷ Ensuring the PA's stability, at least for as long as the Authority remains committed to security coordination, is of paramount importance to Israel. Dealings with Hamas, even if indirect, have to be weighed against this risk.

The PA, far more crucially, finds itself in much the same predicament. It insists that all matters related to Israel's engagement with the Gaza Strip, from reconstruction to ceasefire talks, must unfold under the auspices of the PLO, the umbrella group for all Palestinian factions that has been recognised internationally as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In this respect, the PA and Israel share a fear that any deals with Hamas will prove that it is Hamas's military strategy that brings results, thus further undermining both the legitimacy of the PA and support for its security and economic cooperation with Israel. (In a telling incident, the

¹⁴ Opposition has been ongoing from the early days of the ceasefire negotiations. Michael Bachner, “Bennett rejects potential truce deal with Hamas as ‘reward for terrorists’”, *Times of Israel*, 14 August 2018. Bennett has argued that Israel should take a hard line against Hamas, but not against Gaza civilians: “There's no problem with Gaza citizens receiving food trucks. Today there's inverse use of sticks and carrots; Defence Minister Lieberman leads a sticks policy against Gaza citizens uselessly. In contrast, we are soft toward those trying to breach into Israel. The sticks should be used against Hamas”. Reshet Beit Radio, 23 October 2018.

¹⁵ For more on Israel's separation policy in the context of Gaza, see “What is the ‘Separation Policy’? An Info Sheet”, Gisha Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, June 2012. For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°60, *Averting War in Gaza*, 20 July 2018; and Middle East Report N°162, *No Exit? Gaza and Israel Between Wars*, 26 August 2015. See also Tareq Baconi, “What the Gaza protests portend”, *New York Review Daily*, 15 May 2018.

¹⁶ Yaniv Kubovich and Noa Landau, “Israel decides against toppling Hamas in Gaza, seeks to weaken it”, *Haaretz*, 30 October 2018.

¹⁷ PLO factions boycotted the PLO's Central Council meetings in protest of President Abbas's leadership in August 2018. The PA has received criticism for the sanctions imposed on the Gaza Strip and its authoritarian policies within the West Bank. See “PLO factions boycott Central Committee meeting”, *Middle East Monitor*, 15 August 2018. For more on the PA's policies toward protests in the West Bank, see Oliver Holmes, “Palestinian forces accused of ‘vicious’ response to protests”, *The Guardian*, June 2018.

director of the PA police in Hebron was photographed changing the tire of an Israeli army jeep as that same army was bombing Gaza; the photograph was the subject of many jokes and much criticism on social media, leading to the police chief's dismissal.¹⁸ Moreover, the PA sees engagement by third parties (whether Israel, Egypt or the UN) with Hamas as a way of legitimising its foe, entrenching the division between Hamas and Fatah (the dominant faction in both the PA and the PLO) and weakening the leadership in the West Bank. Thus it has continuously insisted that reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, on its own terms, precede any ceasefire deal or even attempts to lift PA sanctions and ameliorate conditions in Gaza.¹⁹

But if Fatah claims that Hamas-PLO reconciliation is a prerequisite for a ceasefire or deal on Gaza, and despite rhetorical commitment by both Palestinian movements to the notions of reconciliation, the reality is that the two parties remain unwilling to take the necessary steps to end the division. The basic trade-off at the heart of reconciliation discussions for the past eleven years has been that Hamas would relinquish power in Gaza, handing it over to the Fatah-dominated PA, and Fatah would relinquish power in the PLO by admitting Hamas to the organisation. Fatah, under Abbas's leadership, is reluctant to share power with Hamas inside the PLO and insists that the PA's return to Gaza must include the full disarmament of Hamas's military wing and the return of security control to the PA. In other words, the PA views its return to Gaza as contingent on Hamas's de facto surrender.²⁰ Tellingly, Hamas's disarmament has not been a condition of any of the PLO-Hamas reconciliation agreements, including the 2011 Cairo Agreement, which has been the referent for all subsequent reconciliation agreements.²¹ Hamas has stressed its refusal to disarm and has instead indicated that its military apparatus can only be integrated into the Palestinian political system as part of a broader reform of the PLO, which includes enhancing representation and integrating movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad under its umbrella, as agreed in the Cairo Declaration of 2005.²²

Mired in discussions around Hamas's arms, reconciliation talks have stalled. The PA has been both unwilling and unable to take on the thankless task of governing the Gaza Strip, given the level of deprivation and decay that prevails, and given that it would likely be seen as responsible for the failure to achieve effective reconstruc-

¹⁸ The head of Fatah in Yatta appeared in the same photographs. "Hebron police director filmed while repairing an Israeli military jeep", *The Gaza Post*, 15 November 2018.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, PLO official, Ramallah, September 2018.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, PLO official, Fatah Central Committee member, Palestinian negotiator, Ramallah, May-June 2018.

²¹ Reconciliation negotiations have formally taken place between Hamas and the PLO. It is Hamas's representation in the PLO, at a level commensurate with its standing in Palestinian society, that is one of the central issues of dispute. Another major component of reconciliation is bringing the PA, which governs the West Bank, back to Gaza, from which it was expelled by Hamas in June 2007. In practice, because Fatah is the dominant faction in both the PA and the PLO, most reconciliation negotiations have taken place between leaders of Hamas and Fatah. See Crisis Group Report N°162, *No Exit? Gaza and Israel Between Wars*, op. cit.; Middle East Report N°110, *Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus ça change ...*, 20 July 2011; and Middle East Report N°129, *Light at the End of Their Tunnels? Hamas and the Arab Uprisings*, 14 August 2012.

²² For the Cairo Declaration of 2005, see http://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=4894.

tion.²³ PA officials say that taking over Gaza would turn them into Hamas's ATM, as they bring in cash that would strengthen the Islamist movement, which – the PA's formal return aside – almost certainly would remain in de facto control of Gaza.²⁴ With prospects for unity unpromising, and thus the return of the PA to Gaza elusive, any deal producing calm in Gaza would necessarily involve negotiations – direct or indirect – between Israel and Hamas, without Fatah, the PLO or the PA.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, PLO official, Fatah Central Committee member, Palestinian negotiator, Ramallah, May-June 2018. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *No Exit? Gaza and Israel Between Wars*, op. cit.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, PA officials, July 2018.

III. An Indirect Ceasefire Agreement

The Great March of Return is now entering its eighth month. Increasingly, since May, these protests have entailed the risk of an inadvertent Israel/Hamas escalation. Hamas remains under pressure from a mobilised civil society in Gaza to address the suffering in the coastal enclave, and Netanyahu's government is under pressure to return calm to Israel's southern front. The equilibrium of belligerence that has taken hold between the parties since 2007 suggests that this dynamic could lead to an escalation, followed by a temporary ceasefire until the next conflagration.

Reinvigorated Egyptian diplomacy since an escalation in July between Israel and Gaza has perhaps been the greatest disruptor of this established dynamic, and a catalyst for indirect ceasefire discussions between Hamas and Israel to advance in subsequent months. Egypt's constructive role is in part the product of longer-term developments that have been taking place within Hamas. Over the course of the past year, the movement has gone to great lengths to distance itself from the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt and to present itself as a partner that could address Egyptian security concerns in the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip.²⁵ Under the new leadership of Yehya Sinwar, a figure often described as a "ruthless pragmatist", Hamas has found a strongman with whom Egypt can work to stabilise the Gaza Strip and mediate an indirect ceasefire agreement with Israel.²⁶ The UN, represented by the Special Envoy for the Middle East Peace Process, Nikolay Mladenov, has aided Egypt in this effort. Mladenov sees such a ceasefire as a prerequisite for Gaza's longer-term stabilisation and reconstruction.

Aside from facilitating negotiations, Egypt's role has also entailed managing the PA's opposition to a Hamas-Israeli ceasefire. It has sought to assuage the PA's worries about getting sidelined by advancing Palestinian reconciliation talks in tandem with ceasefire discussions. At the same time, it has pressured Abbas to end his obstructionism, which has taken the form of PA sanctions on the Gaza Strip.²⁷ Given their impact on Gaza's economic stability, the PA's sanctions increase pressure on Hamas, undermining its negotiating position with Israel, but also heightening the risk that the Islamist movement would resort to violence against Israel to change the status quo. Following pressure from Egypt in early November, the PA removed some of its sanctions and allowed preliminary ceasefire arrangements to proceed even as Abbas and the rest of the PLO leadership formally continued to insist that reconciliation precede any Hamas-Israeli ceasefire, and that negotiations with Israel take place under the PLO's auspices.²⁸

²⁵ Yasmeen Serhan, "What Hamas's new document does and doesn't say", *The Atlantic*, 1 May 2017.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli security officials, Jerusalem, October 2017 and November 2018.

²⁷ For the latest sanctions, see Ahmad Shehada, "Palestinian Authority readies new round of sanctions on Gaza as Egyptian mediation breaks down", *Mada Masr*, 20 September 2018. These measures were extremely unpopular, even in the West Bank, where the PA's security forces harshly suppressed protests against Abbas's actions. The PLO Central Council decided in its latest meeting not to impose any new sanctions on the Gaza Strip. Holmes, "Palestinian forces accused of 'vicious' response to protests", op. cit.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, PLO, Fatah officials, Ramallah, October-November 2018.

Other factors paved the way this summer for the Israeli government to belatedly act on the advice of its security establishment, which has argued that Gaza needs to be stabilised for true “calm” to be achieved. The unconditional and far-reaching support that the administration of President Donald Trump has provided to Israel has strengthened Netanyahu’s hand when it comes to dealing with the Palestinians.²⁹ As far as Gaza is concerned, this support has taken the form of Trump administration backing for policies of “economic peace”, whereby international donors would underwrite large-scale infrastructure projects and economic initiatives in the Gaza Strip as a form of relief, without addressing the political drivers of Gaza’s immiseration.³⁰ Unlike in the West Bank, where concessions from Israel might be perceived as undermining the priorities of the settlers or signalling a future territorial compromise, Israeli initiatives to alleviate hardship in Gaza can be spun in the positive and apolitical light of humanitarianism. Steps in Gaza also do not cost Israel financially: Israel is asked to allow infrastructure projects to take place, but it has never offered to help pay for them. The Trump administration has assumed a broad posture of hostility toward the Palestinians – moving the Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; stopping funding for UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for Palestinian refugees; cutting U.S. assistance to the PA, to Israeli-Palestinian coexistence programs and to East Jerusalem hospitals. Its stance has boosted Israel’s confidence that Trump’s “deal of the century” – the White House initiative ostensibly under development to end the Arab-Israeli conflict – would be favourable to Israel and not stray too far from its vision for the future of the territories.³¹

In other words, the American position has permitted an emboldened Israeli government to deal with the security challenge of the Gaza Strip without fearing that such dealings might come at a political cost. This reality adds further credence to the PA’s fears that a ceasefire agreement with Hamas is indeed playing into Israel’s hands by entrenching the Palestinian divide and further circumventing any progress on the political front. Still, the PA’s fears have not yet motivated it to give greater priority to reconciliation in order to thwart putative U.S. and Israeli plans to permanently divide Gaza from the West Bank. Instead, it has continued to rely on sanctions that exacerbate the suffering in the Gaza Strip, or that risk another overwhelming escalation, reflecting a PA perception that Hamas remains the greater threat.

With this constellation (apparent alignment of the U.S. administration behind Israel and its vision, a reinvigorated Egyptian role, and international readiness to underwrite humanitarian intervention in Gaza) in view, the priority for Netanyahu has become to secure calm on Israel’s southern front before the forthcoming elections in Israel. These elections were scheduled for November 2019 but now seem likely to be held early (see Section IV below). Another weeks-long war with Hamas as Israel heads to elections would present enormous risks to Netanyahu and members

²⁹ For the impact of Trump’s policies on Israel and the Palestinians, see Adam Entous, “Donald Trump’s new world order”, *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2018.

³⁰ James Oliphant, “White House hosts meeting on Gaza crisis without Palestinians present”, Reuters, 13 March 2018.

³¹ David Gardner, “Trump’s ‘deal of the century’ offers nothing good to Palestinians,” *Financial Times*, 5 September 2018.

of his coalition seen as bearing responsibility for a war that costs Israel significantly without resulting in any Israeli gains.³²

It is against this backdrop that indirect ceasefire discussions have unfolded between Israel and Hamas, with Egyptian and UN mediation, since shortly after the end of the first iteration of the Great March of Return on the anniversary of the Nakba. By November, numerous signs suggested that the negotiations had advanced quite substantially, and that the parties might be in the early days of carrying out a ceasefire.

In the first week of November, an Egyptian team tasked with mediating the Hamas-Israel ceasefire travelled to the Gaza Strip to confer with the leadership of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Higher Committee for the Great March of Return, composed of representatives from political parties and civil society that meet to coordinate the demonstrations.³³ During the Egyptian team's visit, on 2 November, protests at the fence separating Gaza from Israel were calmer than they had been in previous weeks. The following Monday, on 5 November, protest sites in the northern parts of Gaza near Kibbutz Zikim were also relatively quiet.³⁴ The shift was a telling indication that indirect ceasefire discussions between Hamas and Israel had made progress. On 3 November, Palestinian President Abbas travelled to Egypt to meet with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and agreed to support efforts to reduce tensions in Gaza, thereby appearing to pave the way for calming the front line between Gaza and Israel. Palestinian and Israeli officials said that Abbas was put under heavy pressure not just by Egypt but by Israel, which threatened to take part of the PA's tax revenues (which Israel collects on the PA's behalf) and direct them to Gaza, thus circumventing the PA.³⁵

These signs suggested that the indirect Hamas-Israeli discussions had advanced to the early stages of implementing a broader ceasefire deal, one built on the unsigned ceasefire arrangements between Hamas and Israel that ended Operation Protective Edge in 2014.³⁶ The emerging ceasefire agreement is meant to advance in three

³² An Israeli former senior security official speculated that "Netanyahu is settling with Hamas in order to stabilise Gaza before the elections (and he is trying to do the same in Syria via Russia). He doesn't want to have rockets raining down on Israel just before the elections". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 8 November 2018.

³³ Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 1-2 November 2018. The Egyptian team went to demonstrations in Shuja'iya and eastern Jabaliya on 2 November and returned to Gaza City on 5 November.

³⁴ Crisis Group observations, 2-5 November 2018. See also David M. Halbfinger, "Tensions ease in Gaza, allowing money and fuel to roll in", *The New York Times*, 9 November 2018.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli official, Palestinian official, Tel Aviv, Ramallah, November 2018. In early November, PLO Secretary General Saeb Erekat stated: "Last week, the Israeli side informed us that if we do not pay all funds allocated for the Gaza Strip, they will cut [money] from the taxes – they collect customs duties and taxes for us – and transfer them to Gaza". Quoted in Adam Rasgon, "Israel threatening to send PA tax money straight to Gaza – Palestinian official", *Times of Israel*, 5 November 2018.

³⁶ At the end of August 2014, Egypt successfully brokered a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, negotiated (unlike the current agreement) alongside the PLO. The ceasefire ended the 51-day Operation Cast Lead. As part of the agreement, and following the end of hostilities, Israel committed to relaxing the crossings into Gaza for humanitarian and construction materials; expanding the fishing zone for Palestinians off the coast of Gaza; narrowing the buffer zones along the fence with Israel and border with Egypt; and opening the Rafah border with Egypt; before eventually moving the parties toward more substantive discussions related to the construction of a seaport and

stages, with the first initially focused on restoring calm in the Gaza Strip to avoid an escalation that neither Hamas nor Israel desires.³⁷ The second stage would then address a more expansive rehabilitation of Gaza through humanitarian and economic interventions as well as more serious mediation concerning a prisoner exchange.³⁸ The final stage would comprise the return of the PA to Gaza alongside the strip's reconstruction.

In the first stage, all signs pointed to Hamas having acceded to Israel's demand to achieve calm on its southern front. It committed to lowering the intensity of the protests that have been taking place since 30 March by reducing the number of protesters congregating in various locations throughout Gaza; decreasing logistical support, coordination and publicity for the marches; ensuring that tactics used by the protesters, including the use of incendiary kites, burning tires and flaming balloons, would no longer be tolerated; coordinating with other factions, primarily Islamic Jihad, to ensure that no rockets or missiles would be fired from Gaza into Israel; and preventing demonstrators from moving any closer than 500 metres to the fence separating Gaza from Israel.³⁹ Hamas would also restrain the Monday protests near Kibbutz Zikim that rely on flotillas attempting to break Gaza's naval blockade.⁴⁰

The smaller protests on 2 and 5 November suggested that Hamas had begun fulfilling its commitments. In the week preceding these steps by Hamas, Israel had allowed a shipment of diesel fuel, valued at \$60 million and paid for by Qatar, to reach the Gaza Strip. Israel had previously withheld transfer of this shipment as a means of pressuring Hamas to end the protests.⁴¹ Fuel deliveries reached a steady flow of twelve to fourteen trucks per day, enabling electricity supply in the Gaza Strip to be ramped up from six to eighteen hours per day, as Gaza's sole power plant reactivated its third generator.⁴² When the electricity supply increased in early November, Crisis Group's Gaza analyst heard a joke: "For the past few years, whenever the elec-

airport in Gaza. These developments have failed to materialise, despite the relative calm in the areas surrounding the Gaza Strip since. Herb Keinon, "Outline of Protective Edge cease-fire agreement with Hamas", *The Jerusalem Post*, 28 August 2014.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli security officials, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, July 2018; Hamas spokespersons, senior leaders, Gaza City, July 2018.

³⁸ Hamas is holding several Israeli civilians or their remains in Gaza. Israel asserts that Hamas is holding the remains of two dead soldiers from the 2014 war – Oron Shaul and Hadar Goldin – while Hamas refuses to confirm whether either of them is alive. In addition, three Israeli civilians have, in their personal capacity, traversed the fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel and have not returned.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, November 2018.

⁴⁰ According to Hamas, restraining these protests was among the Israeli demands conveyed to Hamas by the Egyptian intelligence delegation. Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza City, November 2018.

⁴¹ Ahmad Abu Amr, "Lieberman halts Qatar's \$60 million fuel flow to Gaza Strip", *Al-Monitor*, 17 October 2018.

⁴² According to a Palestinian Energy and Natural Resources Authority statement, 2 November 2018. Prior to the shipments of Qatar-funded fuel, Gaza electricity in most areas was on for four hours daily, followed by sixteen hours off. At the time of writing, electricity in Gaza is on for eighteen hours, followed by six hours off. Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, November 2018. See also "Israel resumes supplies of fuel into Gaza", *Ma'an News*, 24 October 2018.

tricity would turn on, you could hear your neighbours yell, ‘Ohhh!!’; now you hear them yell ‘Ohhh’ when the electricity goes off”.

As Hamas responded by quieting the protests, Israel initiated subsequent measures in pursuit of a lasting ceasefire. It allowed the transfer of an initial instalment of \$15 million from the total sum of \$90 million over six months that Qatar had earmarked to pay the salaries of civil servants on a pre-selected list prepared in 2014, with the exception of 583 names that Israel had designated as members of both Hamas’s civil service and its military wing.⁴³ Furthermore, Israel allowed Qatar to disburse a total of \$5 million to 50,000 impoverished families within the Gaza Strip.⁴⁴ In addition to the provision of Qatari funds, Israel also scaled back its naval blockade of Gaza from three to twelve nautical miles off the coast. The expansion of the area available for Gaza’s fishermen is eventually to reach fourteen nautical miles.⁴⁵

The agreement did not contain deadlines for when the parties would move from the first to subsequent phases. The unexpected escalation that threatened to drag the parties into all-out war on 11 November, a week after the calm began to take hold in Gaza, was a reminder that Israel and Hamas might not be able to pull off even phase one.

But if the parties do manage to proceed along the path of ceasefire implementation, phase two would entail moving beyond the general calming of the Israel-Gaza hostilities toward a more substantive effort to address the chronic humanitarian and economic suffering within the Gaza Strip.⁴⁶ Major infrastructure projects, funded by the EU, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, France, Qatar and other donors, are lined up to address Gaza’s water crisis, through an EU-funded desalination plant;⁴⁷ its sewage pollution, through World Bank-led waste management projects;⁴⁸ and its electricity crisis, by adapting Gaza’s power plant to run on natural gas from Israel and upgrading Israeli and Egyptian electricity lines into Gaza. In a press conference in Gaza on 10 November, Qatar’s envoy to Gaza, Mohammed al-Emadi, noted that Qatar would be working toward a permanent solution to the electricity problem in Gaza as he announced major infrastructure investments.⁴⁹

Leaked copies of a purported draft of the ceasefire agreement stipulate that the blockade would eventually be lifted by 70 per cent. For this to happen, Egypt would have to ease restrictions it imposed on the Gaza Strip as well. The number of permits for Palestinians in Gaza to travel through the Rafah border between Egypt and Gaza would have to be increased. Furthermore, the Salah al-Din terminal through which

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leader, Gaza City, 9 November 2018.

⁴⁴ Oren Liebermann, Michael Schwartz, Ibrahim Dahman and Mohammed Najib, “Suitcases of \$15m in cash from Qatar bring relief for Gaza”, CNN, 11 November 2018.

⁴⁵ According to announcements by the Israeli army. See also “Emerging Gaza ceasefire to significantly ease blockade”, *Times of Israel*, 3 November 2018.

⁴⁶ For background, see “2017: Tightening of the Closure”, Gisha, January 2018; “Humanitarian Impact of the Gaza Electricity Crisis”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, May 2017.

⁴⁷ “Hope for Gaza: EU creates broad international coalition to provide drinking water to 2 million people in Gaza”, European Commission press release, 20 March 2018.

⁴⁸ “Palestinian Partnership for Infrastructure Trust Fund”, The World Bank, accessed 15 November 2018; “Gaza Solid Waste Management Project”, The World Bank, accessed 15 November 2018.

⁴⁹ “News about advancing ceasefire discussions between Hamas and Israel (Arabic)”, Al Jazeera, 1 November 2018.

some imports transit to Gaza would also have to be upgraded and expanded. To date, there has been no substantial change in access to and from Gaza through either the Rafah or the Erez crossings.⁵⁰ Phase two additionally would comprise progress on prisoner exchange negotiations between Hamas and Israel.⁵¹

Within a three-year period, the parties would then ostensibly move to the final phase of the ceasefire agreement, involving lasting calm and stability in the Gaza Strip. This phase is envisioned to commence with Gaza's reconstruction in accordance with the plan set out by UN Special Envoy Mladenov – a plan closely resembling Israeli proposals made at a March 2018 White House conference on Gaza – as well as the provision of Israeli work permits to Palestinians in Gaza, though there remains strong opposition within Israel's security establishment to this last step.⁵²

As with past reconstruction efforts, the donors underwriting these projects (with the exception of Qatar, which continues to fund major infrastructure projects in Gaza while Hamas is in power), view the PA's control of the Gaza Strip as a prerequisite for this final phase. To this end, Egypt is pursuing reconciliation talks between Hamas and the PLO alongside the ceasefire negotiations. For the time being, Abbas has agreed to tolerate, or at least not disrupt, the first phase of the ceasefire agreement, but reconciliation remains a necessary condition for reaching phase three. But reconciliation could prove difficult to achieve. While the PA insists that there is no place for armed groups outside the authority of the PLO, Hamas argues that the PLO must take measure to reform itself, and include Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the organisation on a representative basis, before it will place its military wing under the PLO's authority. In short, major obstacles continue to hinder the PA's return to Gaza. Egypt and other mediators will need to proactively address these problems if the reality on the ground is to improve in a sustainable and truly meaningful way.⁵³

⁵⁰ Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 5-12 November 2018.

⁵¹ Israel is holding several Palestinians it had released during the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap in 2011, but rearrested in the West Bank in June 2014. Hamas refuses to negotiate with Israel over a new deal while Israel fails to honour the Shalit deal, which stipulates that Israel may not rearrest prisoners released in the Shalit deal unless they have committed a new crime. An Israeli report suggested that Egypt might take a more active role in the prisoner exchange discussions by committing to release members of Hamas held in Egypt. See Alex Fishman, "Stitching up a truce arrangement", *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 9 November 2018.

⁵² Opposition has traditionally come from the Shin Bet. There are reports that the security establishment might soften its stance to admit a small number of labourers. See, for example, Amos Harel, "As Gaza deal comes within grasp, Israel looks for ways to pump money into the strip", *Haaretz*, 7 November 2018.

⁵³ For background, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Averting War in Gaza*, op. cit.

IV. Ceasefire Fragility

On the night of 11 November, in a densely populated area east of Khan Younis, approximately three kilometres from the fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel, Hamas security forces noted a suspicious civilian vehicle next to the residence of a senior member of Hamas's armed wing, the Qassam Brigades. Hamas security forces stopped the vehicle. Rather than a routine investigation, the ensuing security check resulted in a deadly exchange of fire as it became apparent that the vehicle was in fact carrying undercover Israeli agents inside Gaza.⁵⁴ The vehicle reportedly held seven Israeli operatives, several of whom were seated in the back of the van disguised in women's clothing. Highly sophisticated equipment, most likely used for intelligence gathering, was piled in the vehicle.⁵⁵

The ensuing battle led to the deaths of seven members of the Qassam Brigades and other resistance factions. Those killed included a senior officer of Qassam, Noor Baraka. As the shoot-out proceeded, Israel's air force began targeting the area to provide air cover that might allow the undercover team to escape toward the Israeli fence. Drones also filled Gaza's skies.⁵⁶ One Israeli lieutenant colonel was killed and another wounded in the exchange, which ultimately compelled Prime Minister Netanyahu to cut short his trip to Paris.⁵⁷ Israel quickly denied that the operation was an assassination or kidnapping attempt, of Baraka or any other Hamas member.⁵⁸ Qassam, for its part, issued a statement decrying Israel's actions as a "dangerous" offensive, even as it celebrated foiling the operation.⁵⁹

The following evening, on 12 November, after deliberations between Hamas's military and political wings throughout the day, as well as discussions with other militant factions, Hamas decided to retaliate. Between 4pm on 12 November and 11am the following day, its forces fired more than 500 projectiles into Israel.⁶⁰ These included a Kornet missile that struck a bus that had just offloaded some 50 Israeli soldiers, setting it aflame.⁶¹ Another rocket hit a residential building in Ashkelon, in southern Israel, as Israel bombed 160 locations in Gaza, including the al-Aqsa TV building in Gaza City. By the late night of 12 November, it appeared as if the two parties were once again on the brink of full-scale war. Rocket fire from Gaza persisted, killing one

⁵⁴ "Qassam Foils Large Operation of the Zionist Enemy Inside the Gaza Strip", statement issued by Qassam Brigades, 12 November 2018, on file with Crisis Group.

⁵⁵ Photographs released on Hamas-affiliated websites, on file with Crisis Group; Crisis Group interviews, local witnesses, Khan Younis, 12 November 2018.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group observations, Khan Younis, 11-12 November 2018.

⁵⁷ Oliver Holmes and Hazem Balousha, "Eight dead in undercover Israeli operation in Gaza", *The Guardian*, 12 November 2018.

⁵⁸ Judah Ari Gross, "IDF says Gaza raid wasn't an assassination, praises troops' 'heroic' extraction", *Times of Israel*, 12 November 2018.

⁵⁹ Statement issued by Qassam Brigades, op. cit.

⁶⁰ Israeli media and IDF spokesperson announcements.

⁶¹ "Dozens of soldiers said to have exited bus moments before it was hit by anti-tank missile", *Times of Israel Live Blog*, 12 November 2018. Hamas released video footage of the missile strike.

Palestinian man and injuring 27 Israelis, as Israel expanded its bombing campaign, which claimed the lives of seven Palestinians and wounded 25.⁶²

Israel's undercover operation could not have been more untimely or destabilising. The escalation came less than a week after Hamas and Israel had appeared to be moving toward a more stable period of calm. The purpose behind the undercover operation, and the reason for its timing, remain unclear. An Israeli foreign ministry official noted, "[t]he sense was that this would pass smoothly. But it obviously went wrong. In hindsight it was a miscalculation of risks and the timing makes it look particularly bad".⁶³ After the incident, an Israeli major general who formerly headed the army's Southern Command, responsible for Gaza, stated: "Activities that most civilians aren't aware of happen all the time, every night and in every region".⁶⁴ Israel has made over two hundred incursions into Gaza since the beginning of 2015, according to UN figures, but most of these were not undercover operations and took place close to the fence separating Israel from the strip.⁶⁵ Israeli activities that extend more deeply within Gaza are thought to have been much rarer. It is almost certain, however, that this operation was not the first of its kind; indeed, Hamas discovered large amounts of surveillance equipment in central Gaza in May this year.⁶⁶ During the 11 November incident, Hamas announced that it had captured several local men during the pursuit of the undercover vehicle, whom they suspected of having helped the Israeli team.⁶⁷

On 13 November, two days after the conflagration started, Hamas suddenly announced that it accepted a deal to return to the ceasefire, mediated through Egyptian and UN channels. Israel issued no similar statement but suspended its bombing campaign as Hamas's rocket fire receded. Yet, despite the return of the parties to ceasefire implementation, Israel's undercover operation has deepened distrust and hardened negotiating stances. In Israel, Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, resigned, announcing that his party would leave the ruling coalition (thereby possibly triggering an early election), while noting that the ceasefire was a form of "surrendering to terror".⁶⁸ Criticism also came from parties

⁶² Bel Trew, "Palestinian militant groups in Gaza announce ceasefire with Israel after worst fighting escalation in years", *The Independent*, 13 November 2018.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Israeli foreign ministry official, phone interview, 12 November 2018.

⁶⁴ The major general, Tal Russo, asserted that the Israeli operation was not an assassination attempt: "This action – an operation that was apparently exposed – wasn't an assassination attempt. We have other ways of assassinating people and we know how to do it much more elegantly". Cited in Judah Ari Gross, "Intense clashes with Gaza break out as Hamas commander said killed in IDF raid", *The Times of Israel*, 11 November 2018.

⁶⁵ Henriette Chacar, "Israeli incursions into Gaza are the rule, not the exception", *+972 Magazine*, 13 November 2018.

⁶⁶ On 5 May 2018, Hamas discovered surveillance equipment in Deir al-Balah. Attempts to dismantle and remove the equipment triggered an explosion that led to the deaths of several Qassam fighters. Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 6 May 2018.

⁶⁷ Hamas captured a few men suspected of collaboration with the Israeli team during pursuit of the undercover vehicle, and amid Israeli airstrikes, on the evening of 11 November. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas security officer, Gaza City, 11 November 2018.

⁶⁸ "Israel Defence Minister Lieberman resigns over Gaza ceasefire", BBC, 14 November 2018.

to the left of Likud, with opposition leaders casting the ceasefire as a sign of the Netanyahu government's weakness in the face of terrorism.⁶⁹

In Gaza, the effect was the opposite. Hamas's rapid and expansive resort to rocket fire as a way of retaliating against Israel's operation strengthened the movement's position, as factions rallied around it.⁷⁰ Prior to the incident, Hamas was already managing and curbing protests, incendiary attacks, flotillas, armed groups and other tactics used by resistance factions in the strip. It was also taking a tough stance against those resistance factions. In the last week of October, Islamic Jihad broke with Hamas and launched rockets from Gaza into Israel. Israeli media reported that Islamic Jihad's actions were the result of internal tensions triggered by the appointment of the movement's new leader, Ziyad al-Nakhala, who is seen as close to Iran.⁷¹ Hamas reacted strongly to this breaking of ranks, forcing Islamic Jihad to end rocket fire and recommit to coordination on the resistance front.⁷²

Hamas's willingness and ability to harness Islamic Jihad, as well as its clear influence over the protests in early November, reaffirmed its importance in securing calm as a first step toward carrying out the ceasefire agreement. It took these steps despite criticism from opposition factions, such as Fatah, as well as from protesters demanding to avenge the deaths of three teenagers killed by an Israeli airstrike on 28 October.⁷³ A core group of organisers continue to believe that the Great March of Return can elicit tangible concessions from Israel and herald a new phase in the Palestinian liberation project. They oppose what they view as Hamas's treasonous exchange of the lives lost for fuel or money (for "solar [fuel] and dollar", in the rhyming taunt they repeat). Goaded by Fatah and other critics, they accuse Hamas of using "popular anger" and selling the blood of martyrs to negotiate for financial gain rather than liberation.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Following the ceasefire and Lieberman's resignation, Yair Lapid, head of the Yesh Atid party, tweeted: "The resignation of the defence minister reinforces the fact that the prime minister has surrendered to terrorism at the expense of the residents of the south". Similar statements came from Avi Gabbay, head of the Zionist Union party ("There is no security for the residents of the south, and therefore the prime minister must also resign. He is responsible for security just like the defense minister") and opposition leader Tzipi Livni ("The government of failed security must go. No peace, no security – elections now"). "Amid coalition crisis, opposition leaders ramp up calls for elections", *Times of Israel*, 14 November 2018.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 12-14 November 2018.

⁷¹ See "Islamic Jihad claims Gaza rocket fire; IDF says Iran, Syria responsible", *Times of Israel*, 27 October 2018.

⁷² After this escalation, Hamas and Islamic Jihad met in the office of Hamas's leader Ismail Haniyeh, where they renewed their assurances of cooperation. They also made similar commitments to the Egyptian intelligence delegation that was visiting Gaza. Islamic Jihad pledged to pay for the public damage that had been caused by the Israeli retaliation to its solo rocket firing. Knowledgeable sources close to Hamas relayed this information to Crisis Group. Interviews, Gaza City, October-November 2018.

⁷³ Protesters gathered outside Haniyeh's home, demanding that Hamas avenge the deaths of the three teens. Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, October 2018.

⁷⁴ Such accusations were forthcoming, primarily from Fatah and other factions, through statements by their leaders as well as spokespersons. See, for example, the statements by President Abbas's adviser Mahmoud Habbash. "Al-Habbash: Hamas's principles have become diesel and dollar", *al-Watan*, 12 October 2018.

With the return of the parties to the ceasefire track, Hamas's interests now lie in quick relief for the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. The movement cannot be seen as having quieted the protests without securing gains: it must be able to demonstrate the price it has extracted from Israel, particularly given the number of deaths and injuries that Israel has wrought among the protesters since 30 March. Showing gains is more imperative in light of the Israeli undercover operation. Hamas has made clear by continuing protests at Gaza's borders, albeit at a smaller scale, that it offers no guarantee it will not re-escalate if Israel fails to abide by its obligations under the deal. As various drafts purporting to be the ceasefire agreement circulated in local media, Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders stressed that the Great March of Return would persist with "new tactics" until the end of 2018. The leaders explained that those tactics, which encompass Hamas's commitment to the ceasefire and ensure that no arms will be used against Israel nor attempts made to breach the fence, were put in place to protect protesters and limit the loss of life in Gaza. This initial cooling-off period naturally coincides with the winter season when protests are likely to quiet down in any case. Hamas intends to use this period to test Israel's willingness to fulfil its commitments. Failure to do so could lead Hamas to pursue a resurgence of the protests by the spring or summer of 2019.⁷⁵

Hamas has reason to be sceptical that Israel (or Egypt) will deliver. In the past, ceasefire agreements have rarely if ever advanced beyond the initial calming of the Gaza Strip. Israel and Egypt did not sufficiently ease access into Gaza following the end of hostilities in 2014. For the success of this ceasefire agreement, Israel and Egypt will need to meet their commitments to ease the blockade and demonstrate immediate improvement on the ground in Gaza. Otherwise, Hamas is likely to have little choice but to continue expanding the Great March of Return. The latest operation by Israel suggests a failure on its part to appreciate the fragility of the ceasefire, the depth of the crisis in Gaza and the precariousness of Hamas's position, all of which bodes ill for the prospect of Israel responding with sufficient urgency to alleviate the suffering there.

As the history of the past decade suggests, once relative calm is achieved along Israel's fence area with Gaza, the impetus to continue loosening the blockade fades. Netanyahu is already facing accusations from the right and centre that he is being too soft on Hamas. In the face of such domestic pressure, Netanyahu will find it costly to be seen as "rewarding" the marches, or Hamas, by ameliorating the situation in the Gaza Strip too rapidly.

Actors beyond Israel and Hamas also will play a part in the success or failure of the ceasefire arrangements. The near-escalation at the end of October illustrates the possibility that Hamas might be challenged by other factions within Gaza, including Islamic Jihad. The PA, too, remains a possible source of disruption, particularly if Abbas offsets the benefit of Qatari funds for Gaza by imposing new sanctions on the strip. Though the obstacles to reconciliation are as great as ever, and there is little indication that they will be surmounted, the full implementation of the ceasefire plan remains premised on progress on that front.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, October 2018.

V. Conclusion

Low-level skirmishes intermittently interrupted by major escalations have marked the reality of the Gaza Strip for more than eleven years. The elements for breaking this cycle of violence and ensuring longer-term stability are well known. The present ceasefire understandings offer a solid entry point, even as the deadly exchange that erupted on 11-13 November offers a stark warning. If calm is to persist now that it has been restored, the parties will need to ensure that they put into practice not only the first, but also the subsequent, phases of the ceasefire plan.

Some factors give reason for hope. Hamas has demonstrated an ability to restrain its military wing and other resistance factions in the Gaza Strip, and to influence the intensity of the Great March of Return. But Hamas's ability depends in no small part on Israel and Egypt fulfilling their commitments to alleviate the humanitarian suffering in the Gaza Strip. It is therefore now incumbent on Egypt and Israel to shoulder their responsibilities sufficiently and urgently.

The current ceasefire deal is a reflection of Israel's desire for quiet and Hamas's commitment to restrain protests in exchange for economic improvement. This calculus must not deflect attention from the fact that the roots of conflict remain in place – from Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories to the crisis within the Palestinian political leadership. Resolving these problems will require, at a minimum, reconciliation on the Palestinian front, which means overcoming deep mistrust, achieving a common political vision and addressing the issue of Hamas's weapons. The likelihood of such an outcome is extremely slim. Yet while such long-term goals remain unmet, there is a short-term alignment of interests among the stakeholders, primarily Hamas, Israel and Egypt, to reduce the volatility of the Gaza conflict and prevent loss of life. The roadmap to do so is clear. The price for failing to carry out the ceasefire is well known: an endless cycle of war.

Gaza City/Jerusalem/Ramallah/Brussels, 16 November 2018

Appendix A: Map of Gaza



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Global Affairs Canada, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Japanese International Cooperation Agency, Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Emirati Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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November 2018

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