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Cease-Fire Extended, but Not on Hamas's Terms

By Jodi Rudoren / AUG. 26, 2014

JERUSALEM — After 50 days of fighting that took some 2,200 lives, leveled large areas of the Gaza Strip and paralyzed Israel's south for the summer, Israeli and Palestinian leaders reached an open-ended cease-fire agreement on Tuesday that promised only limited change to conditions in Gaza and left unresolved the broader issues underpinning the conflict.

Hamas, the militant Islamist faction that dominates Gaza, declared victory even though it had abandoned most of its demands, ultimately accepting an Egyptian-brokered deal that differs little from one proffered on the battle's seventh day. In effect, the deal put both sides back where they were at the end of eight days of fighting in 2012, with terms that called for easing but not lifting Israeli restrictions on travel, trade and fishing in Gaza.

In Israel, continual barrages of rocket fire and fears about starting school on Monday without a cease-fire had increased pressure on the government from citizens exhausted by what had become a war of attrition. Yuval Steinitz, a senior Israeli minister, said in a television interview Tuesday night that he accepted the cease-fire "with a sour taste of missed opportunity."

"We did not want this violence, and we did not want this war," Mr. Steinitz said. "This is a reasonable arrangement."

In Gaza City, "God is great" blared from mosque loudspeakers, and celebratory gunshots exploded in the air as hundreds waved the green flags of Hamas, while displaced residents raced on mattress-laden tuk-tuks and donkey carts back to damaged or destroyed homes in border areas.

"We declare the victory of the Palestinian resistance, the victory of Gaza," Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas spokesman, announced at Al Shifa Hospital. "We achieved some of our instantaneous demands out of this battle. We become closer to Jerusalem and our Palestinian lands."

A statement from Egypt's Foreign Ministry describing the deal included only vague language about "the aspirations of the Palestinian people" and the need to create "an independent Palestinian state to achieve peace and security in the region." Hamas's call for a seaport and airport in Gaza, and Israel's call for demilitarization of the coastal

territory — along with an exchange of Israeli soldiers' remains for Palestinians in Israeli prisons — were put off for discussion within a month if the truce holds.

“We are all aware that this is an opportunity, not a certainty,” Secretary of State John Kerry said in a statement. He described “certain bedrock outcomes” as essential to a long-term solution, saying that Israel needed to live “without terrorist attacks, without rockets, without tunnels, without sirens going off and families scrambling to bomb shelters,” and that Palestinians required “full economic and social opportunities to build better lives for themselves and for their children.”

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon of the United Nations welcomed the cease-fire but said in a statement, “The blockade of Gaza must end; Israel’s legitimate security concerns must be addressed.” He warned, “Any peace effort that does not tackle the root causes of the crisis will do little more than set the stage for the next cycle of violence.”

The agreement followed a week of renewed fighting after the collapse of an earlier cease-fire. Israel killed several top Hamas military commanders and felled three high-rise buildings in audacious airstrikes, while more than 100 rockets a day pounded its battered south.

More than 2,100 Palestinians were killed since the operation began July 8. Most of them were civilians, including two young siblings struck in their car in the southern city of Khan Younis moments before the cease-fire took effect at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. On the Israeli side, 64 soldiers and six civilians were killed, including two men felled by a mortar round that exploded near a swimming pool in a kibbutz just outside Gaza around 6 p.m., the military said.

“The human catastrophe is just very immense, it’s getting worse and worse every day, and I think that’s one of the reasons Hamas took into consideration in accepting the cease-fire,” said Mkhaimar Abusada, a political scientist at Al-Azhar University in Gaza City. “The mood is very critical of Israel, but they are also asking questions of Hamas: Why did we have to go through all this? Why is there no cease-fire? Why did we provoke Israel into this war? More and more questions are in the minds of the Palestinians, especially in this last week.”

In Israel, support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s performance dropped by more than half this weekend from a high of more than eight in 10 Israeli Jews in the battle’s early days, according to polls conducted for Channel 2 News. Israel’s central bank cut interest rates on Monday to their lowest level ever to counter economic fallout, and Mr. Netanyahu has lashed out in recent days against senior ministers critical of the campaign, which commentators and politicians have increasingly argued was ill conceived.

“At this point, a cease-fire to me only means that I need to prepare the city for the next round,” Mayor Itamar Shimon of Ashkelon, a city of 115,000 less than 10 miles from Gaza, said in a radio interview. “I will only believe in an agreement with Hamas if we

have an international guarantee that all of the planned goals of this operation are reached.”

Israel achieved its original stated goal, to restore quiet, but Hamas’s repeated penetration of Israeli territory through tunnels, the deaths of the most Israeli soldiers since the 2006 Lebanon war, and the killing on Friday of 4-year-old Daniel Tregerman in a kibbutz near Gaza have scarred the country’s psyche.

President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, whose stature fell throughout the conflict, promised on Tuesday a new diplomatic initiative to accompany the cease-fire. His allies said it would demand international guarantees for a clear deadline to end Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories, bypass American-brokered peace talks, and use United Nations institutions and the International Criminal Court as leverage.

“The vision should be very clear, very specific, and understood from A to Z,” Mr. Abbas said as he convened an evening meeting of 52 Palestinian leaders at his headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah, “because engaging in vague negotiations is something we cannot continue to do.”

Though Egypt, Israel and the United States have all said a cease-fire should strengthen Mr. Abbas and give him the leading role in rebuilding Gaza, he was not mentioned in the Egyptian statement. The statement also said nothing about Gaza’s southern Rafah crossing with Egypt, whose frequent closings since President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power in Egypt have been a prime Palestinian complaint.

The agreement restores the six-nautical-mile fishing zone off Gaza’s coast that Israel [agreed to in 2012](#) but later cut back. It also says that Israeli-controlled border crossings will be opened to allow the “quick entry” of humanitarian aid and materials to reconstruct Gaza, where more than 11,000 homes and scores of schools and mosques have been reduced to rubble. A senior Israeli official said the entry of cement and concrete would be monitored to ensure it was used for civilian purposes, because “we’re not interested in allowing Hamas to rebuild its military machine.”

Criticism of the cease-fire came from Israel’s right and left.

“I ask myself, what have we accomplished?” Danny Danon, a leader of Mr. Netanyahu’s Likud Party who is often at odds with the prime minister, said on Army Radio. “If we would have acted much more aggressively to begin with, we would have ended this fighting with a much lower price and much preferable conditions.”

Zehava Galon, head of the left-wing Meretz Party in Parliament, said that the cease-fire came “50 days too late” and that “its terms prove once and for all that this operation was Netanyahu’s strategic failure for embarking on this war without goals, and ending it by giving Hamas support.”

But Israeli analysts said that since 1973, no prime minister has emerged from a war unscathed. **Yehuda Ben Meir**, an expert on public opinion at the **Institute for National Security Studies** in Tel Aviv, cautioned that it was too early to assess the outcome of the campaign.

Several Palestinian analysts said they, too, were waiting for more details. Noura Erakat, a lawyer and professor at George Mason University, called the agreement “unreliable at best,” saying it “lacks precision” about who will oversee the border crossings and reconstruction.

In Gaza City, health officials said Randa Nemer, 19, had been killed and 45 others wounded by the mass firing of gunshots skyward as many residents rushed to celebrate. But some Gazans were circumspect.

“We are happy that the war is over, but there is nothing requiring celebrations in the agreement,” said Bassam Hannouna, 24. “We will celebrate when we see the postponed demands existing on the ground.”

Reporting was contributed by Fares Akram from Gaza; Isabel Kershner from Jerusalem; Said Ghazali from Ramallah, West Bank; David D. Kirkpatrick and Merna Thomas from Cairo; and Michael R. Gordon from Washington.

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