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Gaza on the brink again : Israel says it is unleashing an “unprecedented attack”

More war beckons amid a Trump-Bibi freeze-out



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Full text :

In a career of many crises Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, faces a defining moment. The path he chooses may alter Israel’s relationship with the Palestinians and America, its closest ally. One route involves a re-invasion of Gaza in an attempt to eradicate Hamas, which the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) are poised to do, with forces massed around the strip. It will come at the expense of Gazan and Israeli lives, and further damage Mr Netanyahu’s relationship with the Trump administration and Gulf states. The other path involves a ceasefire that could see Mr Netanyahu’s government collapse, but repair Israel’s influence in the White House at a time when Donald Trump is re-inventing American policy towards the Gulf, Syria and Iran with implications that could last for decades.

The odds of the first path, reinvasion, are now dangerously high. On May 19th Mr Netanyahu said the IDF would be “taking control of all of Gaza.” Israeli troops are poised to capture new swathes of territory in the strip, beyond the 30% of its 365 square kilometres they already control. His finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, a leader of one of the coalition’s far-right parties, went further, saying “we are destroying what is still left of the strip, simply because everything there is one big city of terror.”

The IDF has warned Gazans to leave Khan Younis, a key city, ahead of an “unprecedented attack”. Israel hopes a final surge will eradicate what remains of Hamas. On May 13th a strike may have killed Mohammed Sinwar, one of its last senior commanders. The humanitarian cost is likely to be staggering. Since the collapse of a ceasefire on March 18th perhaps 5,000 Gazans have been killed, taking the total over 50,000, including combatants. There is widespread hunger. In preparation for a ground attack the IDF has been conducting over 100 strikes a day.

The Trump administration appears to have granted Israel licence to act, but Mr Netanyahu appears not to have its support. In private, Steve Witkoff, Mr Trump’s envoy, has urged Mr Netanyahu to return to a deal. J.D. Vance, the vice-president, was planning to go to Israel this week but has cancelled his visit, apparently because he did not want to appear to be endorsing Israel’s latest military expansion. Asked about it on May 19th, Mr Vance was less than effusive: “So, I’m sure we’ll visit Israel sometime in the future, but not today.” Mr Trump and those close to him are refraining from openly criticising the Israeli government. The president has repeatedly said he would like to see the war end, for the hostages to be released and for food to be allowed into Gaza. In public he has put the onus on Hamas. *But the new distance between America and Israel forms part of a pattern that a re-invasion of Gaza may amplify.*

Mr Netanyahu was blindsided by America's decision to embark on talks with Iran aimed at reaching a deal on the future of its nuclear programme. Likewise, Mr Trump's announcement that America had agreed to end its bombing campaign of the Houthis in Yemen, despite their continuing missile attacks on Israel, caught the prime minister unawares. Israel was conspicuously absent from the president's [itinerary during his Middle East tour](#), which included Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia was to be the next Arab country to join Mr Trump's Abraham accords, with it normalising its ties with Israel, but Mr Trump has now accepted that will not happen until the war in Gaza is over. Mr Trump met Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and announced that he was [removing American sanctions from Syria](#), a step that Israel had argued against. For Israel, having free rein in Gaza seems to come alongside a striking loss of influence.

*Is the other path, a new ceasefire, even possible? "Our operation in Gaza is staged so at any moment we can pull back if there's a ceasefire," according to one Israeli general. **Other signs suggest diplomacy is not dead.*** American and Qatari diplomats are pressing Israeli and Hamas negotiators in Doha to reach a new deal. Hamas has released an American-Israeli soldier. Israel has agreed to allow some supplies through and for food to be distributed by aid groups, despite its claims they allow Hamas to steal supplies. Israel's proposed solution, an Israeli-controlled distribution network, that critics say would lead to wide-scale starvation, has been postponed for a week or more.

*And the possible death of Mohammed Sinwar may help too. With another hardliner out of the way, the more pragmatic political leaders of Hamas, who are based in Qatar and other locations outside of Gaza, may have more leeway. Still, the main obstacles to any kind of peace remain. Israel is proposing a ceasefire for around two months, during which more of the hostages will be released and more aid allowed in. **But Hamas has ruled out any deal unless it permanently ends the war and is balking at Israel's demands that it disarm and send its surviving leaders in Gaza into exile.***

*Perhaps there will be a last-minute compromise. Without it, the coming weeks will be bleak. **Mr Netanyahu says he will end the war only once he has "total victory". Total devastation for Gaza and isolation for Israel are more likely.** ■*