

Conquest, war, famine, death: the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have returned to the Holy Land

● As the horror escalates, Hamas and Israel may start talking. Why now?



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Yet again, Gaza is on the brink of either more war or some peace. Barely three weeks after walking away from ceasefire proposals put forward by Donald Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff, Hamas on Monday said those same proposals were now acceptable. What changed?

With his country already in control of 75pc of Gaza, when Benjamin Netanyahu recently announced his intention for Israel to take control of the remainder by occupying Gaza City a number of world leaders were forceful in their condemnation.

This had the effect of emboldening Hamas, which promptly abandoned ceasefire negotiations. It also became clear that this international pressure was not going to stop Netanyahu.

Israel's call-up announcement for an additional 60,000 reservists and the cancellation of leave for a further 20,000 lent credibility to its intention to send up to six Israel Defence Forces (IDF) divisions to occupy the city of one million inhabitants.

To minimise the loss of civilian life in this ground operation, Israel says it plans to move up to 800,000 residents to a new temporary location at Al-Mawasi in the southern part of Gaza, near Rafah. This evacuation is expected to be completed within the next few weeks, at which point the assault on Gaza City will commence.

Despite its oft-stated passion for martyrdom, Hamas wants to survive as an organisation. When faced with the almost certain elimination of its last intact military force in Gaza City, it relented and sought to negotiate.

The latest ceasefire conditions, put forward by the Egyptian and Qatari mediators and now accepted by Hamas, involve a 60-day ceasefire and the release of 10 of hostages and the freeing of 200 Palestinian life-sentence prisoners. But Netanyahu

has now moved the goalposts and is insisting that all the hostages, including the 20 who are believed to be still alive, must be released together.

On the Israeli side, the far-right religious nationalist members of Netanyahu's government were adamantly opposed to any ceasefire, fearing it would allow Hamas time to recover and reorganise.

In effect, the debate on war or peace seems to be driven by the messianic extremists in Israel and Gaza.

In Hamas, the senior political leadership is based in Doha, the Qatari capital, where Khalil al-Hayya seems to be calling the shots.

The military leader on the ground in Gaza, replacing the assassinated Yahya Sinwar, is Izz al-Din al-Haddad. He is the former commander of the Hamas Gaza City brigade and is a military hardliner with a desire to eliminate Israel. Many intelligence reports say al-Haddad favours a military confrontation with the IDF, rather than negotiations for a ceasefire.

Within Israel, there is also a split along strict ideological lines where the far-right tail is wagging the government dog. Driven by their dream of a "Greater Israel", cabinet members Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich don't want a ceasefire either. Their mission is to defeat Hamas as a prelude to occupying all of Gaza and the West Bank — and ideally driving out most Palestinians.

Last week, there was a glimmer of hope in the region, as hundreds of people rallied in Gaza City in a protest march organised by several civic associations. The protesters carried banners reading "Save Gaza, enough" and "Gaza is dying by the killing, hunger and oppression".

The numbers, of course, were small — but the significance was that the protests happened at all, given that defying Hamas carries a punishment of a bullet in the head or being beaten to death with iron bars.

“ The debate on war or peace is being driven by religious extremists

In a striking contrast with the few hundred brave souls who risked their lives protesting in Gaza, over one million people took to the streets in Israel last weekend to support a ceasefire and the release of the remaining hostages. It was the largest march in Israel's history, with almost 500,000 people occupying what has become known as Hostages Square in Tel Aviv.

The latest poll from the Jewish People Policy Institute, an independent think-tank, indicates 54pc of Israelis would support abandoning the goal of eliminating Hamas if it meant the release of all hostages. A similar figure, 53pc, support delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza.

This is undoubtedly in recognition of the reality that starvation now stalks the people of Gaza like never before. Last week Antonio Guterres, the UN secretary general, said a famine in Gaza City was a "man-made disaster" and a "failure of humanity".

His comments came as a UN partner organisation, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), said 514,000 people in northern Gaza were experiencing famine. Netanyahu called this an "outright lie".

The first phase of Israel's invasion of Gaza City began on Wednesday, as the IDF began taking control of the city's outskirts. This is the preliminary stage of the encirclement of the city. According to Israeli army radio, the military is preparing for a "prolonged operation of several months that will run into 2026".

There is little doubt that the aim of this massive Gaza City operation is to force Hamas into a corner from which it will be unable to recover militarily. However, the reality is that it will take weeks for an assault on the scale being planned to get into gear fully. So there is still time for Hamas and Israel to negotiate and finalise a ceasefire that might provide a springboard for a full peace settlement.

With widespread reports not only of famine but also of an epidemic of life-changing skin infections rampant among children in Gaza, it seems that all Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have now returned to reoccupy at least part of the Holy Land.

Given their familiarity with the terrain, they may be difficult to dislodge, at least in the short term.