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Israel Declares Cease-Fire; Hamas Says It Will Fight On

By [STEVEN ERLANGER](#)

JERUSALEM — [Israel](#) declared late Saturday that a unilateral cease-fire would begin in [Gaza](#) within hours, but said its troops would remain in place for now.

After 22 days of war against [Hamas](#), and the deaths of more than 1,200 [Palestinians](#) and 13 Israelis, Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) insisted that “we have reached all the goals of the war, and beyond.” Speaking to the nation late Saturday night, he said that Hamas had “suffered a major blow” and that if it continued to fire rockets into Israel, “the Israeli Army will regard itself as free to respond with force.”

Hamas, battered but hardly broken, said in Gaza that it would continue fighting so long as Israeli troops occupy Gaza. And Israeli officials say a new flurry of rocket launches, to prove that Hamas is neither cowed nor defeated, is likely for at least a short time.

Heavy Israeli bombardment continued throughout the day Saturday, and in an attack that brought scathing criticism from the [United Nations](#), Israeli tank fire killed two young brothers taking shelter at a United Nations school in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahiya.

United Nations aid officials raised questions about whether the attack, and others like it, should be investigated as war crimes. The Israeli Army said that it was investigating the reports at the highest level, but that initial inquiries indicated that troops were returning fire from near or within the school.

On the cease-fire, Mr. Olmert said Israel was responding positively to peace efforts by President [Hosni Mubarak](#) of [Egypt](#), in a clearly orchestrated move by two countries that see the Hamas movement in Gaza as a threat.

Israel will also wait to see the details of an Egyptian effort, supported by the United States, France, Britain and Germany, to stop the smuggling of arms, explosives, cash and men into Gaza through tunnels from Egypt.

Mr. Mubarak and President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France will host a summit meeting on Sunday in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheik to discuss the interdiction of smuggling and the reconstruction of Gaza after the Israeli air and land attack, which has left large areas of the crowded territory in ruins and without basic services like potable water and electricity.

Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) hailed Israel’s cease-fire announcement and said in a statement that the United States “expects that all parties will cease attacks and hostile actions immediately.”

That appeared unlikely as the truce's 2 a.m. start neared early Sunday. News reports as of 6 a.m. seemed to indicate that things were relatively calm.

In Gaza City, a Hamas spokesman in hiding, Fawzi Barhoum, said in a statement that "we will not accept the presence of a single soldier in Gaza," according to Agence-France Presse. "The Zionist enemy must stop all its aggression, completely withdraw from the Gaza Strip, lift the blockade and open the crossings."

Beyond the potential for an effective end to heavy fighting on Sunday, the shape of any lasting peace was far from clear.

The length of Israel's occupation of Gaza has now been put in the hands of Hamas. The Israeli government says it will not sign any deal with the group, which is committed to Israel's destruction and whose rule over Gaza the Israelis do not want to recognize. But Hamas is seen as likely to reassert political control over Gaza.

And Israel and Egypt will be under considerable pressure to reopen its crossings into Gaza for goods, given the size of the reconstruction required, and the crossings for people.

Particularly concerned about limiting smuggling into Gaza, the United States and Israel signed a "memorandum of understanding" on Friday in Washington that calls for expanded cooperation to prevent Hamas from rearming through Egypt. The agreement, which is vague, promises increased American technical assistance and international monitors, presumably to be based in Egypt, to crack down on the smuggling.

As important, the United States agreed to work with [NATO](#) partners to interdict arms smuggling into Gaza by land and sea from Syria and Iran, and in a letter, Britain, France and Germany also offered to help.

The summit meeting in Egypt on Sunday will also include Italy; Spain; Turkey; [Ban Ki-moon](#), the United Nations secretary general; and a representative of the [Palestinian Authority](#), which governs the Palestinian West Bank. The United States was to be represented by Margaret Scobey, the ambassador to Egypt.

Although Mr. Sarkozy began the diplomatic process toward a cease-fire with Mr. Mubarak, it has been a deal shaped by Egypt and Israel.

Mr. Mubarak's foreign minister, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, said that his country would not be bound by the memorandum of understanding agreed to by the United States and Israel and would not accept foreign troops on its soil. But officials of both Israel and the United States say Egypt has been showing a new seriousness about stopping the smuggling.

The Arab and Muslim world again appeared to be split into two camps. Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been openly critical of Hamas, pressing it to agree to a cease-fire. Qatar, meanwhile, which has close ties to both the United States and Iran, held a meeting with Syria, Iran, Mauritania and Hamas's exiled political leader, [Khaled Meshal](#), as the Palestinian representative. [Mahmoud Abbas](#), the president of the Palestinian Authority who is supported by the United States and Egypt, had refused to go to Qatar.

In Beit Lahiya, about 1,600 displaced Gazans have taken shelter at a school run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, or Unrwa, which cares for Palestinian refugees from the 1948-49 war and their

descendants.

John Ging, the Gaza director of the agency, said that two brothers, ages 5 and 7, were killed about 7 a.m. by Israeli fire at the school. Their mother, who was among 14 others wounded, had her legs blown off.

“These two little boys are as innocent, indisputably, as they are dead,” Mr. Ging said. “The question now being asked is: is this and the killing of all other innocent civilians in Gaza a war crime?”

Christopher Gunness, the refugee agency’s spokesman, said: “Where you have a direct hit on an Unrwa school where about 1,600 people had taken refuge, where the Israeli Army knows the coordinates and knows who’s there, where this comes as the latest in a catalogue of direct and indirect attacks on Unrwa facilities, there have to be investigations to establish whether war crimes have been committed.”

The strike was the fourth time Israel has hit an Unrwa school during the war on Hamas. On Jan. 6, Mr. Ging said, 43 people died when an Israeli shell hit the compound of a school in Jabaliya. Israel has disputed the death toll and said it had been returning mortar fire from within the school compound.

Four Israeli soldiers, two of them officers, were seriously hurt by mortar fire in fighting on Saturday morning, the army said, suggesting that they were victims of friendly fire. Five others were also wounded by an antitank missile. The army said that Hamas had fired 15 rockets at Israel on Saturday, lightly wounding five Israelis, in a sharp reduction from daily attacks since the start of the war.

While the details are debated and the dead are counted, a critical long-term issue is whether the Gaza operation restores Israel’s deterrent. Israel wants Hamas, [Hezbollah](#), Iran and the Arab world to view it as too strong and powerful to seriously threaten or attack. That motivation is one reason, Israeli officials say, for going into Gaza so hard, using such firepower, and fighting Hamas as an enemy army.

The answer will not be known for many months, but the key to the Muslim world’s reaction is actually that of the Israeli public, said Yossi Klein Halevi, of the Adelson Institute for Strategic Studies in Jerusalem. “The Arabs take their cue from Israeli responses,” he said. “Deterrence is about how Israelis feel, whether they feel they’ve won or lost.”

Mr. Halevi cited the 1973 war — which Egyptians celebrate and Israelis mourn, though it ended with a spectacular Israel counterattack — and the 2006 war against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Hezbollah’s leader, [Hassan Nasrallah](#), apologized for the 2006 war on television, “but he quickly reversed himself to declare a wonderful victory when he saw the Israeli public declaring defeat,” Mr. Halevi said.

Even more important, perhaps, this war is a test case for any potential Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. If Israelis feel that the West Bank will turn into another kind of chaotic, Hamas-run Gaza, they will be unwilling to withdraw — especially if they believe that if they withdrew and were then attacked from the West Bank, they would not be allowed to respond with force.

“Gaza is an important test of whether we can defend ourselves within the 1967 boundaries,” Mr. Halevi said, noting that Hamas had been attacking Israel proper, not settlements. “Will we be able to defend ourselves if we need to from the West Bank? Will the international community let us?”

The Israeli public has stayed united behind the war as a necessary battle, despite serious misgivings about the death toll of Palestinian civilians and international condemnation. Even Meretz, a party of the Israeli left, supported the air war.

Hamas has modeled itself on Hezbollah, calling on Iranian support. Mr. Nasrallah once spoke of Israeli power as a spider web — impressive from afar, but easily brushed aside. This war against Hamas, Mr. Halevi said, “is the revenge of the spider.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 20, 2009

Because of an editing error, an article in some editions on Sunday about the cease-fire in Gaza misidentified the country to which American Ambassador Margaret Scobey is assigned. It is Egypt, not Syria. (Ms. Scobey, who recently represented the United States at talks about Gaza in Sharm el Sheik, Egypt, was ambassador to Syria from 2003 until 2005.)

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