**Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2024 / Can Trump get a Gaza ceasefire?**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): IS a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza imminent? For 24 hours, there’s been a flurry - a snowstorm even - of news suggesting YES.

SCORING IN <Start n Stop - BMC>

NOEL: It begins with an Israeli negotiating team arriving in Qatar - Monday.

NOEL: Tuesday, a Senior Palestinian negotiator tells the BBC that talks are in a “decisive and final phase.”

NOEL: Then, according to Reuters, Benjamin Netanyahu makes a plan to go to Cairo - which his office denies.

NOEL: And today, CBS reports that William Burns, director of the CIA, is ALSO on his way to Qatar.

NOEL: As all this began on Monday, President-elect Trump gave a press conference and gave a warning.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae6Ux26h5R0&t=1367s)*> Donald Trump, press conference Mar-a-Lago: I’ll be very available on January 20th. And we’ll see. As you know I gave warning that if these hostages aren’t back home by that date, all hell’s gonna break out.*

NOEL: Coming up on *Today, Explained*: can this new administration deliver a ceasefire in Gaza?

**[THEME]**

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Noel King. Amir Tibon [ah-MEER tee-BON] is the diplomatic correspondent for Ha’aretz. Amir was a resident of Nahal Oz [NAH-chal OHZ], a kibbutz near the Gaza border that Hamas militants attacked on October 7, after which he wrote the book “The Gates of Gaza.” Amir, start by telling us where we are with the ceasefire negotiations.

AMIR TIBON (diplomatic correspondent for Ha’aretz): We are closer today than yesterday and closer today than two, three and four months ago. But I would still urge people not to run into any kind of conclusions that we are on the verge of ending the war, that a cease fire will be signed tomorrow, that the hostages are coming back in 48 hours. I would love for all of those things to be true, but I don't think they are. There have been many attempts over the past year to square the circle on one specific issue, which is that Hamas demands that in return for the Israeli hostages, Israel will agree to end the war in Gaza completely, officially, with international safeguards and commitments by world powers, that the war will not be renewed after the last Israeli hostage comes back from Gaza. And the Netanyahu government in Israel refuses to accept this demand and says that it is willing to accept a cease fire, temporary, even a long cease fire of many weeks or months, but not to officially end the war.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/united-nations-general-assembly-day-4-part-1/649577)*> ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU: Because if Hamas stays in power, it will regroup, rearm, and attack Israel again and again and again, as it has vowed to do. So, Hamas has got to go.*

AMIR: And Hamas says without an official and final end to the war, there will not be a deal.

NOEL: At the heart of these negotiations are the hostages. How much of a priority are these hostages for Benjamin Netanyahu? The families are certainly putting a lot of pressure on him.

AMIR: The release of the hostages for the Israeli public is the number one priority. You see it in all the public opinion polls. This is the most important issue to an overwhelming majority of Israelis. And the hostages, we currently have 100 of them in the hands of the enemy. Approximately half of them are considered to be alive. But it sometimes seems that if there are Israelis who are a little less committed to the issue of the hostages, they somehow happen to sit in the government.

NOEL: Huh.

AMIR: Because you do have people in this government, especially the far-right elements of it, messianic ultra-religious members of it, who have other priorities. They want to build settlements in Gaza. Netanyahu is not in that category. Netanyahu doesn't really care for settlements in Gaza, you know, on an ideological or religious level. But the problem is, he needs those people in order to remain in power. And what we're seeing right now is a momentous struggle here in Israel between the families of the hostages and many, many, many Israelis who support them, who are pushing for a deal. And those far right elements in the government who are much less committed to a deal. And Netanyahu, in between until this point, seemingly more on the side of his coalition partners. Maybe it will change in the coming days, but that's the real problem.

NOEL: How much does Trump mean for this war?

AMIR: Trump's entry into the White House will change many, many things all over the world. But it seems that on the issue of the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, it has already been causing change even before he is in the White House.

SCORING IN <Start n Stop - BMC>

AMIR: And we saw it certainly on Lebanon, where there is no doubt that the Israeli decision to go into the cease fire was impacted, at least, by Trump's desire to have that war end before he becomes president. He said it during the election. I want to remind you that Trump campaigned for Arab and Muslim votes in Michigan.

NOEL: Mmhm.

AMIR: And that he has a Lebanese in-law, the father of Tiffany Trump's husband, who has become somewhat of a special envoy of Trump's to the Arab and Muslim world. And we were hearing these tunes all the time that Trump wants to end the war in Lebanon. Regarding Gaza, it took a little more time, but in the last two weeks, we have seen very strong words from Trump expressing his commitment to finding a hostage deal and ending the war in Gaza.

*<*[*CLIP*](http://c-span.org/program/news-conference/president-elect-trump-remarks-to-reporters/653283)*> PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD J. TRUMP: I’ll be very available on January 20th, and we’ll see. As you know, I gave warning that if these hostages aren't back home by that date, all hell’s going to break out. And, very strong.*

AMIR: There is an open question of how much he will still care about it once he is in the White House, and there will be many, many other priorities for him. But for now, it looks like all the actors in this region are looking at this and saying, okay, we don't really want to get into a fight with this new president. He's going to be there for four years. Let's try at least to show him some goodwill.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: What do Israelis think about Donald Trump coming back in?

AMIR: Trump is very popular in Israel. I would say much more popular than any Israeli politician at this point in time. And he enjoys support from different parts of Israeli society. Israelis look at him as a president who was very supportive of Israel during his previous term in office and also as someone that talks a bit like an Israeli, if you want to put it that way.

NOEL: How so?

AMIR: No political correctness.

NOEL: Ah ok.

AMIR: Brash. Says exactly what he thinks. Not always very sensitive to what others will think about his words. And then, you know, I can see him getting quite well in a, you know, group of Israelis sitting in a cafe on Friday morning and talking about whatever is happening in the world.

NOEL: I wonder, from your perspective there, what do you hear about what Palestinians think about Trump coming back into office. As you mentioned, in the United States some Arab-Americans broke for Trump in the 2024 election, believing Joe Biden wasn't doing everything that could be done. How are Palestinians in the region feeling?

AMIR: There are mixed feelings about it because a lot of Palestinians remember Trump from the first term being very much on the side of Israel and taking a very tough stance toward the Palestinians. And the biggest achievement of his foreign policy in the first term were the Abraham Accords, which from a Palestinian perspective, were an attempt to sidestep the Palestinians, to turn them into a minor issue in the regional picture, to come and say Israel can make peace with the Arab world regardless of the Palestinians. And I think there is some concern. But there are also some surprisingly optimistic voices who think that maybe this time around Trump will take a different approach and will also try to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict along with the other regional issues and achievements he would like to have. I know that there has been some contact between Trump and the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. His Lebanese in-law, Massad Boulos, has been the contact point for that relationship, and I guess we'll have to wait and see. It's an open question at this point.

NOEL: Joe Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has been openly talking about working with his successor, who, of course, will be a member of Donald Trump's team. He said it's been professional and serious.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/program/news-conference/national-security-adviser-sullivan-jake-sullivan-news-conference-in-israel/653201)*> JAKE SULLIVAN: [FADE UP] And we've had good discussions, constructive and substantive discussions [FADE UNDER]*

NOEL: Do we know whether the outgoing and incoming administrations in the U.S. are working together on this at all?

AMIR: On the hostage issue, I know that there are some levels of cooperation because the Biden administration is still officially running this file and trying to get a deal. But they are benefiting from the Trump effect.

SCORING IN <On a Straight Down Train Car - BMC>

AMIR: And there is some level of coordination. And I think it's important because it increases the likelihood of a deal actually being reached.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Amir Tibon, diplomatic correspondent for the Haaretz [HA-ARE-ETZ] newspaper in Israel, and author of “The Gates of Gaza.”

Coming up: Donald’s second chance.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: Steven, go ahead and give me your full name and tell me what you do.

STEVEN A. COOK (senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations): Steven A. Cook, I'm a senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

NOEL: In the first half of the show, we talked about what a Donald Trump presidency, a second one, might mean for the war in Israel. Let's go back in time to 2016 to 2020. How did Trump approach Israel in his first term?

STEVEN:Well, Trump was a very pro-Israel president, which is saying something because most presidents actually are very pro-Israel.

SCORING IN – Beep Boop

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-signs-proclamation-on-golan-heights/523849)*> TRUMP: Under my administration the unbreakable alliance between the United States and Israel has never been stronger. You read things, you hear things. It’s never been stronger. Just remember that.*

STEVEN:He moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-signs-proclamation-on-golan-heights/523849)*> TRUMP: At this moment the American embassy stands proudly in Jerusalem, the capital the Jewish people have established and they’ve wanted the embassy for many years, for many decades and frankly through many presidents.*

STEVEN:…something that had been law since the late 1990s, but no president had ever acted on it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-signs-proclamation-on-golan-heights/523849)*> TRUMP: We got it done. Not only did we get it done we also got it built… at a slight cost saving.*

STEVEN: He recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. And in general sort of turned a blind eye to the worst excesses of the Israeli government when it came to settlement in the West Bank.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUvlwUsUebk)*> MSNBC: Let’s turn to the State Department where secretary of state Mike Pompeo is speaking right now*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fhxldwx-Kc)*> CBS: MIKE POMPEO: The establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9e8-uSyNIWs)*> BBC: The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is visiting an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank in the latest breach with decades of US policy in the Middle East.*

SCORING OUT

NOEL: The world has arguably gotten more complex since Donald Trump's last term.

STEVEN:I think so. I think so, yeah.

NOEL: Yeah, okay, okay. You know, we add arguably just in case. Russia, Ukraine, October 7th, every nation that was pulled in after October 7th. Do you think Trump and his foreign policy team recognize things may be more complicated this time around?

STEVEN:You'd like to think that they do, that they're in touch with reality. But, some of the statements that Trump has made about the region would suggest that he thinks he's just going to pick up where he left off when he reluctantly left office in January 2021. He's been talking about expanding the Abraham Accords to include Saudi Arabia.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-and-middle-east-leaders-sign-abraham-accords/552994)*> TRUMP: to cooperate as partners across the broad range of sectors from tourism to trade and health care to security…*

STEVEN:That has been greatly complicated as a result of the war in the Gaza Strip. The Saudi price for normalization has gone up steeply since, since the war began. And now the Saudis are demanding an actual two-state solution,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVNPXW3Vcls)*>* [*Saudi*](https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/saudi) *Foreign Minister Prince Faisal: The answer is a Palestinian state.*

*Moderator: The answer is?*

*Faisai: A Palestinian state.*

*Moderator: Yes.*

STEVEN:Something that the Israelis are not prepared to even entertain at this moment.

NOEL: Do any of his appointments reflect the major changes undergone? Who's he looking at to serve under him on the Middle East and Israel?

SCORING IN – Discretion - BMC

STEVEN:The National Security Advisor-designate Congressman Mike Waltz is someone who is a very pro-Israel personality. Senator Marco Rubio, who's been designated to be the Secretary of State, also has very strong pro-Israel credentials. And of course, his UN permanent representative is Elise Stefanik, the Congresswoman from New York who made a name for herself for being pugnaciously pro-Israel, as well as taking on elite college presidents in those famous hearings after the October 7 attacks.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VtAZBvmzcQ)*> Elise Stefanik: At Harvard does calling for the genocide of Jews violate Harvard's rules of bullying and harassment yes or no?*

*Claudine Gay: It can be depending on the context.*

*Stefanik: What's the context?*

*Gay: Targeted as an individual, targeted at an individual…*

*Stefanik: It's targeted at Jewish students, Jewish individuals. Do you understand your testimony is dehumanizing them? Do you understand that dehumanization is part of anti-Semitism?*

STEVEN:And then there is, of course, Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas, who's been named U.S. ambassador to Israel, who is a very, very pro-Israel figure.

<[CLIP](https://www.npr.org/transcripts/nx-s1-5188521)> *Huckabee: There are certain words I refuse to use. There is no such thing as a West Bank. It's Judea and Samaria. There's no such thing as a settlement. They're communities. They're neighborhoods. They're cities. There's no such thing as an occupation. ~~The only occupiers were the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Turks, the Brits, the Romans. They were occupiers. The Jews are the occupants.~~*

STEVEN:Mike Huckabee might as well be a settler. He doesn't recognize the Palestinian people as a nation.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4chxcXBDXM)*> Huckabee: There's plenty of land in the world that we could find a place and say, okay, let's, let's create a Palestinian state.*

STEVEN:He doesn't regard Israel's settlement in the West Bank as illegal.

MUSIC BREATHES FOR A SEC

STEVEN:This is an administration that is very, very pro-Israel. But of course, these people may end up just being implementers, bit players in what President Trump decides to do. And based on his first term, what he decides to do is what his gut tells him.

SCORING OUT

STEVEN:He sees himself as a great negotiator and I think at least on the two state solution and on Iran's nuclear program, that self-perception as a great negotiator and dealmaker may cause tension with an Israeli government that has other views on these two issues.

NOEL: What do we know of the truth about what Trump and Netanyahu think of each other?

STEVEN:Well, I read Jared Kushner's memoir of his time in the White House so that no one else had to. It was truly a dreadful read. But one of the things I learned, in fact, I think one of the only things I learned in the book, other than the fact that he's a terrible writer and can't even make his grandparents seem charming, was that Netanyahu and Trump, there was a very significant trust deficit between the two leaders.

*<VO> Bibi responded with less-than-expected enthusiasm. Thrown off by the lukewarm response, Trump began to second-guess his decision. As he continued his conversation with Bibi, he wondered aloud why he was taking this risk if the Israeli prime minister didn’t think it was that important. Trump’s voice hardened into a stern tone: “Bibi, I think you are the problem”*

STEVEN:Trump was always concerned that Netanyahu was going to double cross him Netanyahu was always worried that Trump would run afoul of Israel's interests, like sit down and negotiate with the Iranians over a new nuclear deal. Add to the fact that Prime Minister Netanyahu relatively quickly called President Joe Biden when his election was confirmed in November 2020. And this angered President Trump. So ever since Trump's reelection, Netanyahu has made a real effort to call Trump, placate Trump…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRaw30K6dT0)*> NETANYAHU: "I want to thank President Trump for his strong statement yesterday about the need for Hamas to release the hostages, the responsibility of Hamas, and this adds another force to our continued effort to release all the hostages. Thank you President Trump.”*

STEVEN:But I still think that that trust deficit remains because Trump has a different view of things like the two-state solution and the Iran nuclear program than the Israelis do.

NOEL: Now, I'm asking you this question in the context of, it is Tuesday afternoon as we speak and we're hearing a ceasefire may be near. I mean, we've got Reuters and the AP reporting it. I have no idea. When do you think we'll get a ceasefire?

STEVEN: Oh God.

NOEL: Yeah, I know.

STEVEN:I've been listening to columnists and others telling me that a ceasefire is imminent since at least February 2024.

NOEL: Mm hm.

STEVEN:And what I know is that Hamas, and the person of Yahya Sinwar, who the Israelis killed a number of months ago, was not interested in a ceasefire, believing that Hamas was winning the conflict because there's a total war. And even though the Israelis were doing a lot of damage to Hamas' cadres in the Gaza Strip, Israel's international legitimacy was suffering greatly as a result of the conflict. And for Yahya Sinwar and others within Hamas, this was one of the goals, was to undermine Israel's legitimacy in the international, the international order. And then, of course, on the Israeli side, the settlers did not want a ceasefire. They want the quote-unquote total destruction of Hamas to clear the way for the Israelis to essentially resettle the Gaza Strip. So there was no real incentive for a ceasefire. Things have changed significantly since then, however. The Israelis have done a tremendous amount of damage to Hezbollah, Iran's primary proxy in Lebanon. And to the point that Hezbollah has been forced to cut a deal with Israel and there's now a ceasefire in Lebanon. That leaves Hamas standing alone, which Hamas now needs to make a decision. Will it save the remnants of itself by cutting a deal with the Israelis or will it fight on believing that the continued fight will continue to damage Israel internationally and that they're going to play the long game. Some of the indications coming from Israeli ministers and others, the Egyptians and others, is that Hamas has dropped a major sticking point, which is that they demanded that all Israeli forces leave the Gaza Strip. So that may pave the way towards a ceasefire and a hostage exchange.

NOEL: There are a million reasons to want a ceasefire here, not least of which is the humanitarian catastrophe…

STEVEN:Yeah.

NOEL: …which has unfolded for more than a year. But in the blunt calculus of politics, if we do get a ceasefire before Donald Trump is inaugurated, who gets the win? Trump? Biden? Will they fight over it?

STEVEN:Yeah, I mean, certainly Trump will claim it. The Biden team will also claim it. They've been working at this, you know, since the very beginning. I would give neither of them. I would say that the credit goes to the IDF.

NOEL:Mm.

SCORING IN – Vector Mode (synth, minimal drums, drum glitches, modal, slow strings)

STEVEN:Y’know, of course Donald Trump will claim it. I mean, that's why he's been posting on Truth Social and said in his first press conference that there would be hell to pay if the hostages weren't returned by the time he's inaugurated. I think, you know, he's essentially setting it up so he takes the credit for it.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: The man from Plainview. Steven Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations. Thanks to him. Thanks also to Avishay Artsy and Peter Balonon-Rosen who produced today’s show. Matthew Collette edited it. Patrick Boyd and Rob Byers are our engineers. Laura Bullard is our fact-checker. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**