

A ceasefire in Gaza at last

## After 15 months of hell, Israel and Hamas sign a ceasefire deal

Donald Trump provided the X factor by putting heat on Binyamin Netanyahu, who insists the war isn't over yet



Photograph: AP

Jan 15th 2025

AFTER MORE than 15 months of war, and just five days before Donald Trump is inaugurated as America's 47th president on January 20th, a ceasefire in Gaza has at last been agreed. The deal, struck on January 15th, is essentially the same proposal that the outgoing American president, Joe Biden, extracted from Israel in May. It took eight months of tortuous mediation and the joint efforts of both old and new American administrations, alongside those of Egypt and Qatar, to get Israel and Hamas, Gaza's Islamists, to commit.

Mr Trump seems to have been the X factor. He made it clear to the Israelis he has no desire to enter the White House having to manage yet more war in the Middle East. That bellicosity seems to have helped [secure a ceasefire in Lebanon](#), and now one in Gaza.

During the first phase of the accord, meant to last six weeks, Hamas will free 33 of the 98 Israeli hostages still held in Gaza, in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. During this initial period, further talks will be held to finalise the next stage of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and the release of the remaining hostages.

It is too soon to say the war is over. Each stage is fraught with risk. It is unclear how many of the hostages are still alive (Israeli intelligence believes around half of them). Nor is it certain that Hamas can actually deliver them all, since some were captured by other Palestinian groups. Israel, which currently occupies approximately a third of Gaza's territory, is demanding security guarantees in future phases which Hamas will be loth to accept. And its government still insists it is fighting for "total victory", refusing to accept officially that the war could soon be over.

Meanwhile Hamas is divided between its leaders outside Gaza, who have proved more flexible in the talks, and its surviving commanders in the enclave, led by Muhammad Sinwar, a younger brother of Yahya, the mastermind of the October 7th attack who was killed by Israel last October. The younger Mr Sinwar now controls the fate of the Israeli hostages. He is eager to prove to Palestinians and the rest of Hamas that he can drive a tougher bargain in return for freeing the captives. He insisted on being the last to give his assent to the ceasefire and may yet scupper it.

In Israel, too, Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, still has to bring the accord to his cabinet, where his more radical ministers remain opposed to ending the war. He will almost certainly win that vote, but his government may collapse as a result. Still, now that he has promised Mr Trump a deal, it will be difficult for him to wriggle out of it, as he has done so often in the past.

The new administration's approach is yielding results in part because the Trump team has little truck with the diplomatic niceties of the outgoing bunch. When Mr Trump's new envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, a New York real-estate mogul, arrived in Israel for talks on January 11th, he brusquely informed the Israelis he would not wait for the Sabbath to end to meet Mr Netanyahu.

But it is not just manners. Despite five decades of steadfast support for the Jewish state, Mr Biden is less popular in Israel than Mr Trump. Mr Netanyahu could at least tell his supporters that by refusing Mr Biden's demands he was standing up for Israel's interests. That argument is much less convincing when the Israeli right sees the incoming president as much friendlier than his predecessor.

If the ceasefire holds, what next? For over a year Mr Biden and his representatives have dangled the possibility of a grand bargain, which would include an official alliance between Israel and the Saudis, as an incentive for ending the war in Gaza and relaunching a diplomatic process that would lead eventually to a Palestinian state. Mr Netanyahu demurred. The deal with Hamas is a sign that he may finally be shifting in that direction, and not only because Mr Trump is more insistent.

In the past year Israel has gone to war with Hizbullah, the Iranian-backed Shia movement in Lebanon, destroying much of its military capabilities and eliminating its senior leadership. It has done the same to Hamas in Gaza as well. Mr Netanyahu claims to have "changed the face of the Middle East". He has even taken credit for the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Now he may be ready to secure what he believes would be his legacy as Israel's long-serving leader: a deal with the Saudis which he hopes would weaken Iran and curb its regional ambitions.

To do so would probably mean losing his current majority in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. The far-right parties in his coalition have threatened to break with him if Israel ends the war against Hamas. Itamar Ben-Gvir, the national security minister and leader of the Jewish Power party, called the deal with Hamas "terrible" and said it "squanders the achievements of the war so far in Gaza which cost much blood of our fighters".

Mr Netanyahu is trying to keep his radical partners on side by promising them that the war is not yet over. But those close to the prime minister acknowledge that unless Hamas throws a spanner in the works, he is now prepared to go the full course, even if it means losing his majority. At least some of the opposition parties have committed to supporting the government to ensure the Israeli hostages are released, and once the deal is completed, he believes he will be in a better position to face an early election.

Israel's successes, against Hizbullah in particular, have revived Mr Netanyahu's flagging popularity, at least somewhat. And a clear majority of Israelis now support a deal to end the war. In talks with the far right the prime minister has emphasised that the second stage of the deal leading to a full Israeli withdrawal and permanent ceasefire is far from inevitable. This is true, but Mr Netanyahu knows that a return to full warfare in Gaza would incur the wrath of Mr Trump, a president whom, unlike the outgoing one, the prime minister fears crossing. ■