

Trump's rules are now in play, as an uneasy truce comes to Middle East

● Envoy struck a new tone as US played crucial role in finally breaking deadlock



Barry O'Halloran

Last week's spontaneous displays of joy on the streets of Gaza and Israel show how much this ceasefire deal means to both peoples, yet there have been many false dawns that promised peace between Palestinians and the state of Israel. So this deal may have been delivered, but it remains to be seen if it is a long-term breakthrough.

While we wait to see if the joyful reactions of many Palestinians and Israelis will be justified, there are some pertinent questions to be asked. The most obvious of these are why did it take so long to hammer out this deal and why did it happen now?

In all its principal aspects, the agreement seems little different to what was available eight months ago. Back in May, when US president Joe Biden summarised the deal, he presented it as an Israeli proposal. Shortly after his announcement, Hamas indicated it was willing to accept Israel's offer. Negotiations were expected to start imminently. Strangely, nothing happened.

The principal reason for that lack of action was that Israel believed it had not sufficiently degraded Hamas's military capacity. Facing bribery and corruption charges, there were also strong suggestions Benjamin Netanyahu wanted to prolong the war to delay any court proceedings.

Hamas was also not as committed to ceasefire negotiations as it claimed in public. Yahya Sinwar, the mastermind of the October 7, 2023 atrocities, was still convinced his Al-Aqsa Flood surprise invasion of Israel would lead to victory. He believed the attack on Israel would compel both Hezbollah and Iran to intervene on the side of Hamas.

Within a few months, it was evident Sinwar had made a huge strategic error. By the end of last year, the po-

litical landscape of the Middle East had been utterly transformed.

Sinwar and most other senior Hamas leaders had been killed by Israel. Hamas, previously a well-organised military force, had been decimated. Its vast subterranean network of tunnels in Gaza — along with stockpiles of rockets and ammunition — were largely destroyed.

In addition, Hezbollah, Iran's principal proxy in the region, suffered a similar fate to Hamas at the hands of the Israeli army and air force.

Israeli intelligence had been caught unaware by the October 7 invasion, but Mossad pulled off an astonishing coup in Lebanon last year. Up to 3,000 senior and middle-ranking Hezbollah operatives were injured, some seriously, when their pagers exploded. This crippled Hezbollah's military capabilities at a critical time.

Then came the most extraordinary episode of all, when Iran launched its first ever massive drone and ballistic missile assault on Israel. Israel responded by using its air force to reduce Iran's aerial defences to rubble. These attacks exposed the extreme vulnerability of the Ayatollah's regime.

These were the dramatic background events that severely reduced Hamas's room for manoeuvre in any ceasefire talks. Hamas's need for a ceasefire had become acute. The Biden administration was having difficulties getting Netanyahu to commit to serious negotiations. Then, suddenly, last week that changed.

The reason for Netanyahu's dramatic change of heart on negotiations can be explained in one word: Trump.

As both *Al Jazeera* and the *Times of Israel* have reported, the logjam in the ceasefire negotiations was not broken at the Doha discussions. The breakthrough happened in Jerusalem at a "tense" meeting last Saturday between Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff and Netanyahu.

The previous day, Witkoff, a Jewish real-estate developer, had rung Netanyahu's office from Doha to set up the Saturday meeting. He was told it was Shabbat and the prime minister could not be contacted. Following a "salty language" exchange, the Saturday meeting was confirmed.

Witkoff returned to Doha. On Monday, the mediators were notified that

Israeli and Hamas negotiators had accepted the ceasefire-hostage proposals. On Wednesday evening, the deal was announced publicly.

A senior Israeli diplomat said: "Witkoff isn't a diplomat. He doesn't talk like a diplomat, he has no interest in diplomatic manners and diplomatic protocols. He's a businessman who wants to reach a deal quickly and charges ahead unusually aggressively."

Two Arab diplomats said Trump's envoy had done more in one meeting to sway the Israeli prime minister than the Biden administration had done in the previous 12 months.

However, Trump's typically exaggerated claims of taking sole credit are vigorously rejected by Biden and the Democrats — with some reason.

At the start of the week, it was clear to Israelis and Hamas that the rules of the game had changed. By the end of the week, it was clear to everyone else in the region what the new rules were: they were Trump's rules.

The Israeli religious right is up in arms over the deal. The two government ministers from those factions, Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, will almost certainly vote against

what they see as a deal with the devil.

The far right are also dismayed and shocked that Trump, who they had assumed to be an unquestioning ally, had pressed Netanyahu into making compromises to accommodate Hamas. By Wednesday, their last resort was "to pray again that God will harden Pharaoh's heart" and that Hamas would reject the deal.

Their prayers went unanswered. As a result, however, Netanyahu's government has been seriously weakened and may fall in the not-too-distant future.

This is a lengthy deal involving three interconnected phases — a lot could go wrong.

Even in advance of any further glitches, the two leaders who, for over 12 months, have been centrally involved in structuring the deal, have starkly differing views on its consequences.

Trying to burnish his legacy, outgoing president Biden claims it signals the end of the war in Gaza. In order to keep his far-right coalition allies on board, Netanyahu argues the complete opposite; that under the deal the war in Gaza can still be prosecuted.

It may be a while yet before the fog of the war in Gaza dissipates entirely.


GALWAY
BAY HOTEL



Room Sale

ENJOY COMPLIMENTARY ACTIVITIES SUCH AS:

- Wine & Whiskey Tasting
- Painting & Prosecco
- Aqua Aerobics, Mindfulness and Yoga

From
€89*
for 2 people

*T&C's Apply

091 520 520 | galwaybayhotel.com