

Israel's Iran success paves way for an uneasy Gaza ceasefire

● Donald Trump steps up pressure to end to 'very brutal war' but historic differences make a lasting peace hard to achieve



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As the tenuous ceasefire between Israel and Iran continued to hold last week, US hopes turned to bringing an end to the war in Gaza. In the wake of the latest Israeli bombing of a beach cafe in Gaza City and the hundreds of Palestinians who have been shot dead queueing for food, it may seem odd that there is optimism for a peace settlement in the war-ravaged enclave. The IDF, after all, has stepped up its strikes in the course of the past week.

And with Friday's announcement that Hamas is also on board, the final piece of the jigsaw is now in place for the US-sponsored negotiations to get under way in earnest.

Having been instrumental in helping Benjamin Netanyahu degrade the Iranian nuclear threat, Donald Trump now feels empowered to demand a quid pro quo to call a halt to what he calls "this very brutal war" in Gaza.

The message coming from the White House is loud and clear. "Make the deal in Gaza, get the hostages back," the president posted on his Truth Social platform early last Sunday.

This is not to suggest that peace is about to break out in a matter of days or even weeks, but rather that we may be witnessing the beginning of the end of the war, an outcome that Israel's success in Iran has helped to bring about.

The Israeli air force's precision-bombing campaign in Iran, with minimal civilian casualties, is the antithesis of the carpet-bombing it has conducted in Gaza with its attendant horrors of mass civilian casualties.

In the case of the recent cafe strike, Israel used a type of fragmentation bomb that is normally only used against a military

target; between 24 and 36 Palestinians are reported to have died.

The stark contrast between the bombing campaigns has severely undermined the legitimacy of continuing the war in Gaza. In Iran, the IDF has taken out a range of senior military leaders by sending rockets into their bedrooms, causing minimal damage to the rest of the apartment block. In Gaza, to eliminate Hamas terrorists, it feels the necessity to flatten whole neighbourhoods.

From what he said on Thursday, even Trump seems to recognise that such heavy-handed actions are no longer sustainable; "I want the people of Gaza to be safe. That's more important than anything else. They've gone through hell."

Although the contents of the proposed peace deal have not been published, authoritative leaks indicate the broad outlines of what is being discussed. There is to be a 60-day ceasefire, during which 10 living hostages (out of 20 remaining) are to be released as well as 18 dead hostages; there is to be a partial withdrawal of IDF forces from Gaza; and increased humanitarian aid for Palestinians. Most importantly, negotiations for a final end to the Gaza war would take place.

Israeli security officials have given anonymous confirmation that the temporary ceasefire is expected to lead to a permanent cessation of hostilities. But for that to happen some very significant roadblocks need to be surmounted. For example, Israel has demanded that Hamas surrender and disarm and that its leaders go into exile, conditions the group has repeatedly rejected. Netanyahu's political career has been about two things; thwarting the emergence of a nuclear Iran and preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state. The latter could be summarised as "no Hamas and no Abbas".

For him, the acceptance of Hamas in Gaza would mean that he had lost the war, while accepting a role for the Palestinian Authority's Mahmoud Abbas would mean that he had lost the peace.

Even so, there are three reasons why this deal has a reasonable chance of success: Netanyahu is stronger; Hamas is weaker; and Trump is impatient. These important negotiations are

likely to take place in Qatar, and we will know whether the discussions are the real deal or not if Ron Dermer, Netanyahu's right-hand man, goes to Doha. That's because he dislikes the Qataris intensely and the feeling is mutual. If they are prepared to stomach each other for weeks on end, then an agreement is close and the current optimism may be justified.

Nevertheless, as always in the Middle East, optimism must be balanced with realism. At best, what is on offer is a solution to stop the immediate bloodletting in Gaza. In itself, it may not even be a step in the direction of the vaunted two-state solution.

Bill Clinton, who more than any other American president expended enormous amounts of political capital on trying to achieve a two-state solution, said in an interview last year:



“Israel hit a Gazan seaside cafe with a type of bomb that is normally only used against a military target

“I think what's happened there in the last 25 years is one of the great tragedies of the 21st century.”

Looking back, he still can't believe "what Arafat walked away from... a Palestinian state, with a capital in East Jerusalem, 96pc of the West Bank, 4pc of Israel to make up for the 4pc of the West Bank to be annexed for Israeli settlements."

With tears in his eyes, a clearly emotional Clinton said: "You walk away from these once-in-a-lifetime peace opportunities, and you can't complain 25 years later when the doors weren't all still open."

Not only did Hamas win the 2006 election in Gaza, but reputable opinion polls carried out since in both the West Bank and Gaza indicate that if elections were held today it would likely win in both. Hamas, a designated terrorist organisation whose founding charter calls for the slaughter of Jews and the destruction of the Israeli state, still has the support of most Palestinians.

In light of these realities, Western politicians, including the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and President Michael D Higgins need to ask themselves: do they really think that their endlessly repeated mantra of a two-state solution is any more likely today than it was during Clinton's presidency?

Furthermore, why have Palestinians rejected every offer of a two-state solution for the past 80 years? The answer to that awkward question may be found in a speech to the House of Commons in February 1947. Then foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin (no friend of the Jews) explained why Britain had failed in its mandate to establish a Jewish state.

"His Majesty's government have been faced with an irreconcilable conflict of principles... For the Jews, the essential point of principle is the creation of a sovereign Jewish state. For the Arabs, the essential point of principle is to resist to the last the establishment of Jewish sovereignty in any part of Palestine."

While an end to the nightmare in Gaza would be greatly welcomed, unfortunately, the continued existence of this "irreconcilable conflict of principles" is likely to stymie any more substantial resolution to the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict for some considerable time.