

Barry O'Halloran: Hamas had no choice but to finally bow to the inevitable

Terror group has been decimated, and its leaders realised that basic survival was the priority



Palestinians wave Egyptian and Palestinian flags as they travel along the coastal road in the central Gaza Strip. Photo: AP

What a difference a day makes. On Tuesday the war in Gaza had entered its third year: then 24 hours later came the single most significant step to bring it to an end.

Hamas agreed to release all remaining 48 hostages, 20 of whom are believed to be alive. In exchange, Israel will release almost 2,000 Palestinian prisoners and withdraw its forces to agreed demarcation lines. Apart from stopping the death and destruction, more aid will flow into Gaza immediately.

This is a first phase and not the end of the war, but there is considerable optimism that it might be the beginning of the end. The elusive quest for peace in the Middle East has been pursued by successive US presidents for over four decades: is it possible that the improbable figure of Donald Trump might succeed where all others have failed?

His 20-point plan had only been announced at the start of the previous week. With its talk of “decommissioning” and phased sequencing and such like, it is broadly modelled on the Good Friday Agreement: the single greatest achievement of British and Irish diplomacy of the last three decades.

It is no surprise Israel prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed up to Trump’s deal, because it delivers all of Israel’s war aims. It is equally unsurprising that Hamas thought long and hard about the plan as it envisages its removal from power and its demise as a terrorist organisation.

The most astonishing aspect of this first phase of the deal is that Hamas agreed to release all hostages, alive and dead, more or less in one go right at the beginning.

For months, Trump had insisted upon a single comprehensive release of all hostages — no more “dribs and drabs”, he said. Up to this week nobody really thought this would be possible. Why, they wondered, would Hamas give up its “insurance policy”? To everyone’s surprise, it did.

After two years of a relentless and bloody war, Hamas was in dire straits. Its top military echelon had been eliminated. Most of its local commanders and virtually all its experienced operatives were dead. Such a depletion of its ranks meant its command-and-control system no longer functioned. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) were in control of over 70pc of Gaza.



Michel Illouz, father of Israeli hostage Guy Illouz, and Ofir Braslavski, father of Israeli hostage Rom Braslavski, after ceasefire was announced. Photo: Reuters

Most significantly, Gaza City, Hamas’s last stronghold, which up to two months ago had never been invaded by the IDF, was now encircled by a huge Israeli force. Hamas was facing a stark choice. Make a last stand in Gaza City and risk being obliterated, or accept the inevitable.

Politically, the pressure on Hamas was enormous. A wide array of key players across the Middle East came together for the first time to insist it was time to end the war. There were the Gulf states, including Hamas’s ally and financial backer Qatar; the Arab League added its unanimous voice, as did the Muslim Brotherhood-associated government of Turkey. The reality is that most Middle Eastern states, and not just Israel, are opposed to what Hamas represents.

To add to its problems, Hamas’s ally in Lebanon, Hezbollah, had been crippled already by Israel, and its main rocket supplier, Iran, has other things to worry about. To say things looked bleak for Hamas would be to understate the position.

Taking everything together, the external leadership of Hamas, based in Doha, decided that the priority was basic survival. There was only one way to achieve that: take Trump’s deal.

On Wednesday, Hamas bowed to the inevitable and made the formal announcement of acceptance. However, whether Hamas means it just wants to bide its time and live to fight another day or, as the Trump peace plan envisages, they effectively disappear from Gaza, only time will tell.

A clearly delighted Trump took to his social media platform that night to confirm Israel and Hamas had “both signed off on the first phase of our Peace Plan”. That simple statement marked the culmination of months of intensive and at times fraught behind-the-scenes negotiations.

The plan is well-stocked with vague and ambiguous language

Even Netanyahu, famously criticised by Trump recently for being “so f\*\*king negative”, was in an expansive mood, saying: “With God’s help, together we will continue to achieve all of our goals and expand peace with our neighbours.” There is still a very long road ahead to secure a lasting peace in the Middle East. Nevertheless, as the Chinese saying goes: A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Even on a cursory reading, the plan is well-stocked with vague and ambiguous language. This was referred to throughout the Good Friday negotiations as “constructive ambiguity” and became its signature phrase. It’s the type of diplomatic fudge that allows each party to interpret the text as it sees fit. Above all, it avoids the use of precise language that could otherwise scupper a deal. Its singular benefit is that it creates the illusion that everybody wins.

Again, as the Good Friday Agreement illustrates, it’s true that every day the guns remain silent and the bombs don’t fall makes it harder for either side to resume the war. Like WB Yeats, the negotiators in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh will be acutely aware that “peace comes dropping slow”.

They will no doubt also be heartened by the spontaneous scenes of jubilation in Israel and Gaza that greeted the announcement of the ceasefire. It is evidence that for ordinary people peace has no cost: it is priceless.



Donald Trump with Benjamin Netanyahu after they met for peace talks. Photo: Getty

The fact it takes two to tango is something the West seems to have lost sight of over the last two years. Political leaders and so-called activists, including active journalists, have endlessly called for Israel to “stop the genocide”. This one-sided, relentless focus on Israel has effectively ignored Hamas. Given the scale of what happened and the nightly scenes of horror on our televisions, this is understandable, but not conducive to establishing conditions for a ceasefire.

Then along came the unorthodox Trump and instead of blaming Israel, he put pressure on Hamas. The tip of the spear of that pressure was the changed attitude of the Arab and Muslim states in the region. No longer willing to write blank political cheques for Hamas, they were open to Trump’s persuasion.

But if there was one event that laid the foundation for this week’s peace initiative, it was Israel’s 12-day war in June against Iran in which, unexpectedly, Trump’s military participated. It effectively removed Iran as a serious player in the Middle East and gave Israel the whip hand. This not only humiliated Iran, it removed Hamas’ single greatest military supporter and left its political strategy in a shambles.

If long-term peace really does break out in Gaza and the Middle East as a result of Trump’s peace plan, then the hobbling of Iran’s malign capacity will have been pivotal.

As Israel’s legendary leader David Ben-Gurion once said: “In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.”

For the Israeli hostage families, their belief in miracles finally came true this week.