FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 09.04.2026 | Sam Kahn

Ceasefire is a big word for backing down

With no agreement on core issues, the risk of renewed escalation between the US and Iran remains dangerously high

It's difficult to think of a day with quite the same anxiety as 7 April 2026. Doing his best Darth Vader imitation, Donald Trump announced via Truth Social that 'a whole civilisation will die tonight, never to be brought back again', sparking what the *Wall Street Journal* called a 'frantic global guessing game over his real intentions'. Even if the presumption was that this was a version of 'mad dog' diplomacy, with the unusual twist that Trump seemed to be the one just barely holding himself back on the leash, the day had the uneasy quiet of the lead-up to the Iraq War — the whole world just waiting for something really terrible and irrevocable to happen.

So, needless to say, the sudden and unexpected announcement of a ceasefire is an immense relief to everyone involved. Trump has apparently found his 'offramp with Iran', as *The New York Times* put it, and the fatal collision course between two powers – with the world's energy markets held hostage in the exchange – has, for the time being, been averted.

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All good news, then, until you start to read what's involved in the ceasefire proposal. Iran's 10-point plan, which Trump called 'a workable basis on which to negotiate', includes the following stipulations: lifting of all sanctions against Iran, reparations for damage done to Iran during the conflict, acceptance by the United States of Iran's right to enrich nuclear materials and continued Iranian control over the Strait of Hormuz.

Trump, not so surprisingly, had a different interpretation of what was on the table. The administration assured Israel, as *The Times of Israel* reported, that America will in coming negotiations resist demands

for reparations or the removal of heavy sanctions, and will demand that Iran remove all nuclear material from the country, halt uranium enrichment and remove the ballistic missile threat.

So, in other words, there's no agreement on anything at all.

Massive confusion

The truth may be closer to what Trump articulated in his social media post announcing the ceasefire — that the United States and Israel's bombing would stop on the condition that Iran agreed to the 'complete, immediate and safe opening of the Strait of Hormuz'. Or to put it a different way, the United States would allow everything to return to where it was before the start of hostilities – when the Strait of Hormuz was fully open and functional – except now with Iran having the opportunity to make its own demands. As a negotiation goes, it's really closer to a hostage standoff than anything else — Iran puts a gun to the head of its most valuable hostage and Trump declares victory the moment the hostage is released.

A bit more of the truth of the situation may have been revealed in the positively statesmanlike approach that the Trump administration suddenly adopted in the wake of the ceasefire announcement. 'The success of our military created … an opening for a diplomatic solution and long-term peace', White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement, adding, 'Additionally, President Trump got the Strait of Hormuz reopened.' So — the Trump administration pretty much finds itself right back where Obama and decades of US presidents have been, drawn to a difficult negotiating table, with Iran having established its deterrent capacity and with the nuclear programme as the most significant bargaining chip of all. (Whether we will even get to that is somewhat questionable. Iran welcomed the announcement of the ceasefire by launching ballistic missiles towards Jerusalem and five Gulf states, while Israel has specifically excluded ongoing operations in Lebanon from the ceasefire.)

To the Iranians, the possibility of talks represented 'a significant diplomatic victory for the Iranian nation', as the Supreme National Security Council said in a statement. To take Trump at his word – that the 10-point proposal represents even a 'basis' for talks – is, as *The Times of Israel* put it, 'an extraordinary step down by the US after 47 years of hostilities with Iran.'

The conduct of the war has

Trump, of course, was quick to dispel that nasty rumour. 'We won, ok?' he said in a press

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conference on 6 April. And lest there be any doubt of that, he added in a telephone interview that it was 'a total and complete victory, 100 per cent, no question about it.' This stage of the conflict ends, then, as so many conflicts have before — with both sides declaring victory.

The massive confusion may trace itself back to the impromptu way the war was launched on the US side, without any clear sense – beyond a bit of wishful thinking – of what the actual objectives were. That becomes evident in a deeply reported piece from *The New York Times*, which demonstrates the extent to which the war truly was Benjamin Netanyahu's brainchild — with Netanyahu delivering a critical briefing in the Situation Room on 11 February arguing that quick strikes could destroy Iran's senior leadership and ballistic missile programme and that the conditions were in place for a popular uprising to topple the Islamic Republic.

That presentation seemed to persuade Trump, even as US intelligence estimates presented a very different view. John Ratcliffe, the CIA director, called Israel's regime change scenario 'farcical', while Secretary of State Marco Rubio characterised it as 'bullshit'. Other elements of Netanyahu's pitch – for instance, that Iran would be so weakened from air strikes that it would lose the ability to choke off the Strait of Hormuz – proved, in subsequent events, to be just as 'detached from reality', in *The New York Times*' phrasing, as the visions of civil war and regime change.

Yes, the United States and Israel have had significant tactical successes. Around 40 senior Iranian officials, including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have been killed in airstrikes. Over 5 000 members of Iran's military have been killed. Iran's military infrastructure – and particularly its ability to launch offensive operations – appears to be significantly degraded. The United States and Israel have thoroughly demonstrated their ability to dominate Iran's skies and to strike, with startling precision, virtually anywhere they wish. The most defensible part of Netanyahu's proposal – that inaction would allow Iran to increase its missile production, while immediate action would curb the country's ability to project force in the region – is still an arguable proposition. But the conduct of the war has only gone to show that regime change was a far-fetched possibility and that Trump was never all that serious about it.

The ceasefire – while it may not speak to any of the actual areas of disputation – does at least reveal something of the true intentions of both sides. Trump has indicated that he remains more showman than warlord.

He would like to continue with hype-ready adventures in different parts of the world — and in the spinning of the war, he will be able to point to the killing of the ayatollah, as well as the ready-for-primetime story of the rescuing of the downed American pilots, as achievements.

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The Iranians, meanwhile, are able to prove the durability of their regime. They had a great deal thrown at them. They did not falter when they lost their supreme leader and much of their senior leadership. They continued to fire missiles and drones all around the region. They were able to demonstrate the strength of their trump card, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. There was no popular uprising and no Kurdish invasion. In peace talks, they may well be able to achieve a lifting of some sanctions and maybe even an imposition of tolls in the Strait of Hormuz — which would be an astonishing diplomatic success for a regime that was presumed to be on its last legs. And, presumably, the cat-and-mouse game with the nuclear programme will continue indefinitely.

Maybe most significant of all, Iran demonstrated that it is a different kind of regime from what is often thought. Vertically-oriented autocracies are assumed to be inherently weak — topple the leader, the thinking goes, and the rest of the structure crumbles. But reporting reveals that the recently-appointed Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei has been incapacitated for weeks. Nobody actually knows who is running Iran or who has been leading the military response. The presumption is that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps holds *de facto* control, and that the state has moved to a more horizontal style of leadership — an adaptation also seen in groups like Hamas and Hezbollah as they responded to Israel's policy of decapitation.

The question of who actually is on the other side of the table may be most significant for Trump in his effort to spin the war. It will be important for him to argue, if the ceasefire is to hold, that this new iteration of the Islamic Republic is somehow different. His claim is that he has already achieved a kind of soft regime change — that Iran is now led by new, 'much more reasonable leaders'. That's the same playbook as in Venezuela, where Delcy Rodríguez, the vice president and long-time regime loyalist, is suddenly presented as the face of change. Meet the new boss; same as the old boss.

On a day when an ancient civilisation is not actually being obliterated, it may seem churlish to be anything other than grateful that an offramp has been found, whatever that offramp may be. But having experienced myriad false hopes of ceasefires in the Gaza war, we would do well to be aware of how fragile ceasefires can be and how much rests on the genuine intentions of the participants. Trump is very far from having achieved the strategic objectives of the war, and if he faces intractable opposition at the negotiating table, there will be a hard question of whether he resumes the fighting or just tries to spin. For the sake of Iran's citizens, let's root for spin.

This article was first published on Persuasion.



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