Peace at last?

Trump's enforced Gaza ceasefire marks a turning point — but the road to a durable peace remains long

Is this the breakthrough that could finally end the seemingly endless horror? Many questions remain about the ceasefire in Gaza pushed by President Donald Trump. Nevertheless, it is the most promising attempt in two years to end a war that has become militarily pointless. Above all, one can only hope that the deal succeeds for the sake of the last remaining hostages, who have endured nearly two years of torment, and for the deeply suffering civilian population of Gaza.

It has long been obvious that the key to ending the war lies in Washington. Without American money, weapons and diplomatic backing, Israel would not have been able to wage this campaign. And even today, it is clear that Prime Minister Netanyahu shows little willingness to see reason. His right-wing government would continue this war if it got the green light from the White House.

Changes in US policy

However, the calculation has shifted. For the US, the geopolitical costs have apparently become too high. Israel's attack on Qatar, a US ally, was the straw that broke the camel's back. The retreat of the financially powerful Gulf allies had to be prevented, and the price is the ceasefire imposed on Israel. Added to this is Trump's hunger for international recognition. In its typically modest fashion, the White House press office has dubbed him the 'Peace President'. Credit where credit is due — *if* the fragile peace holds. And for it to hold, tying the ceasefire to the president's pathological narcissism may not be the worst guarantee.

Domestically, the costs of the war for the US have long exceeded its benefits. The former bipartisan consensus on unrestricted support for Israel is crumbling; polls show weaker approval among parts of the US population, especially among Democratic voters. The lobby group AIPAC, which recently boasted that it had 90 per cent of Congress in its pocket, is becoming a toxic label. For Trump, the rift within his own MAGA movement is also relevant: influential opinion makers are

increasingly questioning how massive military and financial support can be reconciled with his 'America First' doctrine.

What's more, unlike in Ukraine, where his attempts have failed for the time being, Trump wields the authority to enforce peace in Gaza. The US holds all the 'trump' cards. This situation is also a matter of power for the US president. After his initial meeting with the ambitious, then still young Prime Minister Netanyahu in 1996, President Bill Clinton reportedly exclaimed, 'Who's the f**king superpower here?' For a long time, it seemed as if the tail was wagging the dog when it came to US Middle East policy. Trump is now making clear who the true world power is — and who, in the contemptuous words of MAGA chief ideologist Steve Bannon, is merely a 'protectorate'.

What's next?

But where do the warring parties themselves stand after two years of relentless fighting? In August 2024, Netanyahu had still been proclaiming 'total victory' in his eerie appearance before the US Congress, interrupted by thunderous applause. The defeat is certainly total for the Palestinian civilian population. The Israeli campaign has left behind a people bombed out, homeless and war-wounded. Rarely before has a people with no means of escape had to endure such a war for years on end. The images from Gaza are like something out of a horror dystopia about the last days of humanity.

For Israel, the outcome of this war is hugely contradictory. The official war aim was to destroy Hamas. This was not achieved. Even after almost two years, the heavily armed nuclear power has not been able to completely defeat a primitive militia confined to an area less than half the size of New York City. The terrorist group remains a guerrilla force and a political power to be reckoned with. However, even according to former Israeli military officials, it has long since ceased to pose a military threat to the Israeli heartland. And that is what the supposed 'legitimate self-defence' that Tel Aviv continues to claim for itself should have been about.

The military victory over Hamas had already been achieved as early as the beginning of 2024. Everything that came after that prolonged this war pointlessly. At least pointless in terms of self-defence — but the nature of the war and the statements from the Israeli government suggested that the war aims were much more far-reaching. Many Israelis have become increasingly vocal in their criticism that the liberation of the hostages has slipped further and further down the list of priorities. Hamas was not the ultimate enemy here; rather, the Palestinian national project was to be

destroyed for good. Because, to the horror of right-wing forces in Israel, this had moved back to the top of the international agenda after 7 October.

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The destruction in Gaza went far beyond military necessity. This suggests that there should never be a day after. A terrorist organisation that moves among the civilian population like a fish in water must above all be defeated politically. However, Israel has always prevented the necessary involvement of alternative Palestinian and regional forces. Instead, it has indulged in feverish dreams of ethnic cleansing, which have even been touted to the US president. A growing international chorus of international law and genocide experts has identified conditions tantamount to genocide.

At the very least, there is now a chance that the prospect of peace could bring an end to the worst of it. The live broadcast images have severely damaged Israel's reputation around the world — possibly for decades to come. In large parts of the Global South, the country is now considered a pariah state, and even close allies have become estranged. Where governments still act as partners, support among the population is crumbling. And the process of coming to terms with what has happened, including the legal process, is still to come. At the same time, there is international momentum for the two-state solution — a concept that had previously been invoked only rhetorically and had largely disappeared from the agenda. Much to the chagrin of the hegemonic forces in the Jewish state, the conflict has now become internationalised.

Not included in all this are the psychological and political consequences. An entire generation of young people has been politicised by the horrific images from Gaza. Not only in the region, but almost throughout the world. The effects of this are difficult to assess; they could still manifest themselves decades from now. In rejection, but also in terror and extremism. A lasting peace – the promise of the so-called Abraham Accords – may not be possible in the near future. The Arab rulers may be willing to accept this, but their people are increasingly less so.

The geopolitical upheavals are certainly impressive. Iran has been pushed out of the Levant, and Hezbollah defeated. But how sustainable are these developments without diplomatic backing? After all, Israel is not in a position to provide this. Its unchallenged dominance rests on feet of clay.

It is a supposed hegemon whose dominance depends heavily on unwavering American support, which may not last indefinitely. The Muslim regional powers have long been balancing against this regional power that is so dependent on foreign countries. They have now enforced a ceasefire, but in this increasingly multipolar world, they will not accept American dictates forever when it comes to the kind of peace that is to follow.

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For this is the greatest weakness of Trump's plan. It remains vague about what should follow the release of hostages and the ceasefire. As total as Hamas' military defeat is, as much as it miscalculated the October 7 attack – when it challenged an Israel that turned out to be completely different, much more brutal, ruthless and destructive than anything it had anticipated – politically, it has managed to rekindle national aspirations, albeit at an enormous, inhuman cost to the battered Palestinian people.

War is now followed by the struggle for peace. Views on this could hardly be more polarised. A two-state solution is completely unacceptable to the hegemonic right-wing forces in Israel. However, the war aim of preventing this solution once and for all has been missed. The Palestinians, by contrast – and even the battered Hamas, recognising political reality, is likely to fall in line – now know that they have substantial international support for statehood within the 1967 borders. The overwhelming majority of states are on board, at least rhetorically — a real rarity in this increasingly divided world.

On a procedural level, Israel still has ways to block such an outcome. Politically, a culture war has long been raging over Palestine. The Jewish state is to be sold to the rising right-wing populist forces in the West as a bulwark against Islam and barbarism. In return, it is hoped that support for occupation and oppression will continue indefinitely. It is a risky calculation in a world where the West's influence is waning. However, risky calculations are nothing unusual in the history of the Jewish state.

Politically, if the ceasefire does indeed hold, everything is open. In Gaza, the rules-based world has come to an end, but the multipolar world could make a comeback in this long-internationalised conflict. The Palestinians, who escaped political ruin at the last minute, could now be the ones with the stronger cards. However, they still need to play them politically intelligently.



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