

MIDDLE EAST

Israel-Hamas agreements: a starting point, not an endpoint

WORLD

10_10_2025



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Much to the chagrin of his detractors, US President Donald Trump must be credited with being the main protagonist in the Israel-Hamas agreement that, until a few days ago, no one would have bet on. One can therefore understand his aspiration to receive the

Nobel Peace Prize, despite the fact that the choices of recent decades have decisively devalued the significance of this prize.

However, it would be unfortunate if, on the day of celebrations in Israel and Gaza for the ceasefire, the focus shifted from the situation in the Middle East to Trump's desires — we shall see if they are realised.

In any case, the agreement — which was also reached thanks to the cooperation of Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, whom Trump has acknowledged — should not be considered an end point, but a starting point. This is not only because the exchange of prisoners and the ceasefire are only the first steps in the peace plan announced by Trump last week, which will have to be followed by more complicated steps that are still to be negotiated, but also because, to guarantee future stability, the root causes of a conflict that has lasted at least 77 years must be addressed. Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, has said this several times, reiterating it yesterday: 'The end of the war is not the end of the conflict'.

At this delicate moment, sabotage by elements or factions in either camp that oppose the agreements is to be feared above all. Unfortunately, it often happens in the Middle East that, as peace agreements approach, there's an attempt to thwart them with a sensational gesture. The 7 October 2023 massacre also falls into this category, as it occurred just as the signing of the Abrahamic Accords between Israel and Saudi Arabia was expected. These accords have remained frozen ever since. Going back further still, we recall the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by a settler who considered him a traitor for signing the Oslo Accords with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

The agreement signed on 9 October puts Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a difficult position, as he has had to abandon his plans to clear Gaza of the Palestinian presence and annex the West Bank. These objectives were gradually made explicit during the war, even though the status of the area known as Judea and Samaria under the Trump Plan is still to be defined. In order to reach an agreement, Hamas had to be recognised as a legitimate counterpart. Therefore, it will be difficult to envisage the terrorist group leaving quietly as the Trump Plan would suggest.

In fact, the agreement demonstrates the serious mistake Netanyahu made in claiming to eliminate Hamas by force alone. After two years of intense bombing, he has still failed to do so. Trump understood that armed action had to be accompanied by vigorous diplomatic action aimed at convincing Hamas' sponsor countries to withdraw

their support. This was the key to success, as demonstrated by Qatar's active cooperation in the mediation process. It is also significant that Iran expressed satisfaction with the agreement last night, according to Trump: 'Iran wants to work for peace,' he said, 'and we will work with Iran.'

Over time, we will discover the quid pro quo for this broad diplomatic support.

However, the fact remains that a solution can only be found if each of the parties involved has some of their interests satisfied.

However, the necessary steps for the future require different leaderships in the two camps. True peace will never be possible unless there is mutual recognition of the legitimacy of inhabiting this land. This is the key point before we can consider any institutional arrangements; having two states pursuing mutual annihilation would not improve the situation. This very prospect demands a change of leadership on both sides. Netanyahu and his extremist government are no longer credible, and a terrorist organisation like Hamas is even less so, regardless of who leads it.

As far as can be foreseen now, a change will be easier in Israel, where elections could bring a political leader who believes in the need for a true peace agreement and coexistence. The situation for the Palestinians is much more complicated. If Hamas and the other terrorist organisations were to be wiped out of Gaza and the National Authority were to lose all credibility, who would represent the Palestinian people? An international government with local 'technicians', as envisaged by the Trump Plan, could only be a temporary solution. Moreover, the recent experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that governments led by local figures but imposed from abroad are not viable.

Only time will tell if these agreements will bring about the necessary changes to strengthen and stabilise them. Let us not lose sight of the fact that the work to achieve peace has only just begun.