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The Lessons of Trump's Gaza Peace Deal

The President reversed the Biden method and put Israel's security first.

By [The Editorial Board](#) [Follow](#)

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The Gaza peace deal accepted by Israel and Hamas late on Wednesday is a big new opportunity for the Middle East and a signature moment, if it holds, for President Trump's foreign policy. It's also a moment to consider the lessons of how it finally happened.

Unless Hamas reneges before Monday, this "first phase" deal will free all 20 living Israeli hostages still in Gaza—within 72 hours of a small Israeli withdrawal. The deal will stop the fighting and bring more aid for Gaza's civilians.

Remarkably, Hamas is giving up its best leverage but Israel isn't. Even after the hostages are ransomed, Israeli soldiers will remain in more than half of Gaza, including by the Egyptian border to stop weapons smuggling.

Israel isn't emptying its prisons as Hamas had demanded, but it is releasing 250 terrorists serving life sentences and 1,700 Gazans detained during the war. Will this seed the next attack, as a 2011 hostage deal seeded Oct. 7, 2023, by freeing its mastermind?

The answer depends on Israel's ability to enforce the latter phases of the deal. If the new Gulf Arab-led stabilization force to be deployed in Gaza fails to disarm Hamas and demilitarize the strip, Israeli troops will be in position to do so themselves with what Mr. Trump calls "full backing." In accepting these terms, Hamas effectively acknowledges its defeat, even if it hopes to bide its time and live to fight another day.

How did this peace arrive after two years? The dubious theory of Israel's critics is that Mr. Trump finally squeezed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This wishcasting fails to explain Hamas's concessions and gets the story backward: Mr. Trump's consistent support for Israel achieved what all of [Joe Biden](#)'s pressure on and threats to Israel didn't.

Mr. Trump was able to push past some of Mr. Netanyahu's concerns about postwar Gaza governance because he had earned Israel's trust. With Mr. Biden, the Prime Minister could presume Israel would be denied the freedom of action to keep Hamas down.

Mr. Netanyahu deserves credit for withstanding U.S. and domestic Israeli pressure to end the war earlier and in a weaker position: before Israel took Rafah, knocked Hezbollah out of the fight in Lebanon, and smashed the Iranian nuclear program. These victories left Israel in a position of military dominance and Hamas without Iran's proxy allies.

The lessons of Mr. Trump's method are also worth noting. First, sustained U.S. pressure was needed on Hamas, not Israel. The more Mr. Biden restrained Israel or blocked arms shipments, the less reason Hamas had to cut a deal. The terrorists expected Mr. Biden to force Israel to stop if they held out long enough.

Mr. Trump reversed Hamas's calculus. Neither protests nor Iranian escalation would cause him to rein in Israel. Instead his threats to Hamas garnered a January hostage deal, after which he encouraged Israel to conquer Gaza. That was nearing completion when Hamas took this new deal.

Second, there was no substitute for Israeli military pressure. Even a few weeks ago, the conventional wisdom was that the war was no longer accomplishing much, least of all the recent Gaza City offensive. Fighting in this sensitive area was supposed to doom the hostages.

Hamas saw it differently. Facing the demolition of its capital, it first agreed to a partial hostage deal that it had resisted for months. When Mr. Netanyahu said this wasn't enough and demanded all hostages be freed at once, critics said this meant the Prime Minister wanted no deal. Wrong again. Hamas buckled and Israel is getting back all hostages.

Third, Hamas's allies had to feel the heat. Mr. Biden stressed de-escalation, opposing the offensive against Hezbollah and shielding Iran from stronger retaliation. He backed Egypt in blocking Gazan refugees and renewed the U.S. military base in Qatar for nothing in return.

Mr. Trump backed and then joined Israel's June campaign against Iran, leaving Hamas's political strategy in shambles. Iranian escalation could no longer bail out Hamas. The President also leveraged Qatar, Turkey and Egypt to coerce Hamas into a deal. It turns out these U.S. partners had that power all along.

Qatar seems to have been influenced by Israel's much-denounced Sept. 9 strike on Hamas leaders in Doha, which endangered the ruling al-Thani family's lucrative double game. That threat, along with U.S. conciliations that followed, coaxed Qatar to demand its Hamas client sign on the dotted line. The deal now opens the prospect of expanding the Abraham Accords between Israel and the Arab states.

Mr. Trump's approach to the Middle East has been the opposite of Obama-Biden's—and the opposite of his own in Ukraine. Do you pressure the ally, willing and able to fight, or the enemy? If Mr. Trump now reverses his strategy on Russia, next year even the Nobel committee might find it impossible to deny him the peace prize.

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