

The least bad exit from Trump's war of choice

To ensure deal succeeds, the US president must contain Israel's prime minister

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The deal announced by the US and Iran after weeks of diplomatic back and forth holds out hopes of an end to a conflict that has engulfed the Middle East, and a reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. It is, though, still far from being a permanent settlement. It extends an April 8 ceasefire by 60 days during which many of the thornier issues, including the fate of Iran's nuclear programme, will be tackled. Spoilers are possible, and the region will remain on edge. Both parties will use the days before Friday's scheduled signing to spin their versions of the deal. But it is a welcome step that should at least put a lid on Donald Trump's reckless war of choice.

The reopening of the strait, closed since the US president and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched the war, should ease the crisis in global energy supplies. The US will lift its naval blockade. Gulf states, dragged into a war they counselled Trump against when Iran retaliated by targeting US Arab allies, will breathe easier.

Crucially, the weapons are supposed to fall silent on all fronts. The conflict has killed more than 7,000 people. This includes almost 4,000 killed by Israeli strikes in Lebanon where Israel and Hizbollah, Iran's most important proxy, have been battling.

The deal has many critics, from hawks in the US to ultra-hardliners in Iran. Netanyahu, who wanted to continue the fight, is chastened and angry. Trump and Netanyahu have failed to secure many war objectives; the regime is not only intact but has been empowered, after withstanding the bombing and proving its ability to close the Strait of Hormuz. Before the war, Iran was engaging in nuclear talks, and shipping was passing freely through the strait.

But this deal is the least bad way for Trump to extricate himself from a crisis he ought never to have ignited. And ending the war is in both sides' interests. While Iran did not capitulate, it suffered devastating blows. Any sanctions relief will be dependent on the progress of the nuclear talks. The regime's next test will be managing a deepening economic crisis, runaway inflation and the risks of social discontent. Tehran should engage seriously to reach a final settlement.

For the deal to succeed, it will be imperative that Trump contain Netanyahu. It was jeopardised just as it was about to be signed last week by an Israeli strike on Beirut, after Hizbollah fired drones towards Israel. Trump publicly chastised the Israeli premier. Now he must maintain the pressure to avoid any repetition. He has the tools: Israel is dependent on US weaponry and defences; Netanyahu on Trump's political support. Since Hamas's horrific 2023 attack on Israel ignited waves of conflict across the Middle East, first Joe Biden and then Trump gave Netanyahu carte blanche to wage war as he saw fit.

If Trump has now lost patience with Netanyahu, this would serve the interests of the US and Israel. Since Hamas's attack, Israel has achieved significant battlefield successes against its enemies. But the two and a half years of conflict have proved what many predicted: military might alone will not resolve the threats Israel faces.

Hizbollah and Iran's other proxies are malign actors that need to be contained. But that can only happen as part of broader diplomatic processes, starting with an end to the Iran war and a proper ceasefire in Lebanon. Regional powers that share concerns about Iran and its proxies can help, but Israel should stop antagonising them; it cannot act with disregard for the interests of its allies.

Netanyahu was among those who steered Trump into this calamity with his boastful predictions of the Islamic regime's quick collapse. The US president must not repeat past mistakes in this push for peace.