

How the Trump Factor Pushed Israel Towards Lebanon Ceasefire

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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The Biden White House brokered the deal, but Trump's return is significantly influencing Binyamin Netanyahu's actions.

The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon, brokered by President Biden's administration, is holding. While the skill of Biden's envoy, Amos Hochstein, was crucial to producing the agreement, a number of realities made it possible. They include Israel's military achievements, Iran's implicit acknowledgment of those achievements, the desire of the Lebanese to end the war, and a decisive move from Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, who was prepared to accept the agreement even though he knew that some of his coalition members and mayors in northern Israel would be likely to oppose it.

Those on the right of Netanyahu argued that there was an opportunity to eliminate Hezbollah. He knew that Hezbollah could not be eliminated but could be weakened further, yet he chose to accept the ceasefire—to the dismay of many Israelis. Netanyahu has not made a career of going against his base but he did so this time and Donald Trump's imminent return to the White House probably played a part in his decision.

To unpick Netanyahu's reasoning, first consider Israel's achievements on the battlefield. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has decimated Hezbollah's leadership, killed most of its commanders, destroyed as much as 80 per cent of its rockets and dismantled much of its infrastructure.

This has not just been a disaster for Hezbollah: it has been devastating for Iran. Hezbollah is the crown jewel of what Iran calls the "axis of resistance." It trained all the other Iranian proxies, helped them develop their own weapons industries, served as the shock troops for Iran in Syria—and its pre-war stockpile of 150,000 rockets was a deterrent against Israel attacking the Iranian nuclear programme. That deterrent is now gone. For Iran, the longer the war

went on, the weaker Hezbollah would become. It simply could not afford to lose Hezbollah and a ceasefire became increasingly necessary.

No doubt in part because of all its extraordinary successes, the IDF was also ready to bring the war to an end. After more than a year of war, it needs to replenish its munitions, and its forces, especially its reserves, are in need of rest. The IDF believes it has achieved its most important war goal: destruction of Hezbollah's Radwan forces and their infrastructure along the Israeli border, reducing the chance of an October 7-style attack from Lebanon.

Moreover, the IDF has a long memory of being stuck in southern Lebanon for 18 years after the 1982 war. As one senior Israeli officer said to me: "We know what it means to be stuck in the Lebanese mud and we cannot let that happen this time."

So Netanyahu had good reason to go for a ceasefire, provided it ensured that Hezbollah could not come back to the south or reconstitute the threat it had posed. And the weak Lebanese government had a strong interest in ending a war that has killed roughly 3,800 Lebanese people and **displaced more than one million** (<https://www.thetimes.com/article/israel-lebanon-ceasefire-deal-hezbollah-d0jqlwvzg>).

But ending wars in the Middle East is never easy. All the moving parts must be aligned. Here the Biden administration stepped in, with Hochstein orchestrating the moves, knowing that all parties might want this to end—but none wanted to admit that they needed it to end more than the others did.

The death of **Hassan Nasrallah** (<https://www.thetimes.com/article/hezbollah-cleric-had-come-to-believe-his-own-publicity-5236kmnch>), Hezbollah's former leader, removed a significant obstacle to a deal. Hochstein and the Biden administration understood that meant it would be possible at long last to implement the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1701—which mandated the demilitarisation of the area in Lebanon south of the Litani River to the Israeli border and no rearmament of Hezbollah.

The group had violated these provisions from the time the resolution was adopted in 2006. But the circumstances are different now: Hezbollah is dramatically weaker; Israel, after October 7 last year, will take no chances and will react to any violation; and the Biden administration is assuming greater responsibility today than the U.S. government did in 2006, by monitoring implementation of the agreement and chairing the committee for dealing with possible violations.

Will the ceasefire in Lebanon provide a spur to ending the war in Gaza? Biden hopes so, provided the hostages are released. To produce what Biden hopes will be "a day after" in Gaza would require some combination of Arab states—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain and others—playing a role in administering Gaza on a transitional basis. That would allow Israel to withdraw and create, in time, a reformed Palestinian Authority to replace Hamas in Gaza.

For Netanyahu the political price of this would be high, with the hawkish ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich threatening to leave the government. While Netanyahu's political position has improved over the last couple of months, with his Likud party clearly doing better in the polls, the current coalition would not survive a new election.

Polling by the Maariv newspaper last week, two days after the ceasefire, found that neither Likud nor its rivals would gain enough seats to win a majority if there was an election, although it suggested that Naftali Bennett, the former prime minister, might gain enough seats to form a coalition government if he re-entered politics at the head of a new right-wing party.

Given that, no one in the current government has an interest in going to the polls—and that includes Netanyahu. He certainly does not want the government to collapse, but then neither do Ben-Gvir nor Smotrich want to be seen as

being responsible for bringing down a right-wing/religious government.

From that standpoint, an end to the war—which does not leave a vacuum but also does not have Israel still in Gaza—will test both the prime minister and those messianic nationalist ministers who seem primed to challenge him should he withdraw from Gaza and reject their aim of resettling it.

But here again we see the Trump factor at work. He wants the war in Gaza to be over. In Israel, Trump is seen as a strong supporter of the Jewish state—although not necessarily a predictable one. In the current circumstances, with Israel increasingly isolated internationally, Trump’s already significant leverage—meaning there is a cost in saying no to him—will become even greater.

Remember that during Trump’s first term, Netanyahu refrained from annexing territory in the West Bank after announcing that Israel would do so in the areas allotted to it as part of Trump’s peace plan, unveiled in 2020. Trump has said that expanding the Abraham Accords is a priority for him. These accords, also agreed in 2020, normalised relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco. Trump wants to bring Saudi Arabia on board. But the Saudis will require an end to the war in Gaza and a credible pathway to a Palestinian state.

Netanyahu may therefore soon face some hard choices: acquiesce to Trump and risk his coalition, or reject Trump and face uncertain consequences. Knowing that Netanyahu’s priority has always been to neutralise Iran, he may propose a trade-off: if Trump takes care of the Iranian nuclear programme he will respond to what Trump asks of him regarding the Palestinians. For Bibi, the great survivor, agreeing to a ceasefire in Lebanon may be the easy part.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Sunday Times website (<https://www.thetimes.com/article/55e13c85-25f1-42e3-8bad-c9bfe5d44f7b>). ❖

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