

Gaza deaths: Who cares?

by GWYNNE DYER

The Palestinian death toll in the Gaza Strip since last October's Hamas attacks on Israeli settlements will reach 40,000 people in the next week or so. (It's back up around 50-100 civilians dead per day).

Around 1,200 Israelis were killed in the October attacks, so nobody can say that Israel's response was unprovoked. However, it has been hugely disproportionate, and in many Western cities, there are weekly protest marches against the carnage in the Gaza Strip. However, there have been virtually none in Israel or in the Gaza Strip itself.

To be fair, most Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are too busy running for their lives to protest much. Most families have had to flee multiple times as the focus of the Israeli forces shifts back and forth. Besides, Hamas still has enough control over the population to punish anybody who openly demands a cease-fire.

There are many demonstrations in Israel calling on Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to sign a cease-fire and bring the Jewish hostages home, but none about the fate of the Palestinians. Many even share Netanyahu's fantasy that they can have a short cease-fire, get the hostages back, and then resume killing Palestinians.

Sorry, let me rephrase that. I should have said: 'Resume killing Hamas fighters, knowing full well that five or ten or twenty Palestinian civilians, about a third of them children, will die as collateral damage for every Hamas fighter who is eliminated.' Because that is what is actually happening.

But surely at least Hamas must want the slaughter of Palestinian civilians to stop. No, it does not. It's just as much in favour of the slaughter of the innocents as the Israelis are. Maybe even more so, because Israel only has anger whereas Hamas has a genuine strategy.

From the first day of the planning for Hamas's attacks on Israel, its real objective was to get Israel to kill as many Palestinians as possible. Why would Hamas want that? Because it was the only way to derail Netanyahu's strategy of sidelining the Palestinians and making peace with all the other Arabs.

Hamas and the other 'rejectionist' Palestinian groups have been losing ground for many years. The rest of the Arab world was sick and tired of the confrontation and saw a 'two-state' solution (separate Israeli and Palestinian states living side by side) as a lost cause.

To restore its credibility, Hamas needed not only to show some life by attacking Israel. It had to fight the Israelis to a standstill. Since it had no regular army and air force to wage an open battle, it could only do that on home ground, where it could use guerilla tactics.

That's what last October's attacks were for: to enrage the Israelis so much that they would invade Gaza in force. In Gaza there are endless tightly packed buildings to hide in, and endless tunnels beneath them, and every 'martyred' Palestinian civilian will create more allies and supporters for the Palestinian cause in the Arab world and even further abroad.

Israel's generals probably understood what Hamas wanted, but popular anger meant they could not prevent it. They were like the more intelligent American generals in 2001, who realized that the 9/11 attacks were intended to sucker the United States into futile invasions of Arab countries but were still compelled by public opinion to wade into that swamp.

Netanyahu may or may not understand Hamas's strategy, but he needs a big, long war himself for two reasons. One is to postpone a public inquiry into his negligence in failing to forestall the October attacks; the other is to hold his ramshackle coalition together. (If

he loses office his trial on corruption charges resumes, with jail a possible outcome.)

So none of the local players cares a fig about dead Palestinians. Indeed, in the case of Hamas, the more dead Palestinian civilians the better. The only player with the power to force an early cease-fire on the combatants is the United States ? but that means Joe Biden, and he probably won't.

In mid-June, I predicted ?a permanent cease-fire (in Gaza) and a hostage release within a month, six weeks tops?, on the grounds that ?US strategic interests and Biden's own political future both require that this war stops and that Netanyahu relinquishes power. If Biden does not come to the right decision himself, those around him will impose it on him.?

Well, they didn't, and they clearly lack the will or the skill to do so now. Although Biden has now stepped down as a presidential candidate, he will still be in office for six months. That may be how long the war in Gaza goes on, too ? unless an Israeli war with Hezbollah in the north triggers a larger crisis region-wide.