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Ceasefire in doubt

Gwynne DyerOur World Today

It didn't take long. Just ten days after the Gaza ceasefire was grudgingly accepted by Israel and the Hamas organization that has ruled the territory for the past eighteen years, they were shooting at each other again.

It seems to have started with a rocket fired at an Israeli tank in the south of the Strip that killed two soldiers of the Israel Defence Force (IDF). Israel replied with air strikes in the north, centre and south of the territory, killing forty-four people, before a sullen ceasefire was re-established, but it illustrated the fragility of the whole deal.

The fundamental problem, which nobody acknowledges out loud, is that neither party to the deal actually wants it to succeed. Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu can only achieve his long-term goal of driving Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip by collapsing the deal. Hamas will be dismantled and eradicated if it cannot sabotage the deal.

For the moment, therefore, they are ?objective allies' in the task of destroying the ceasefire, although they never communicate or coordinate directly. Once the ceasefire is dead, however, they will once again be deadly enemies ? and even now they are free to kill each other, since that is the best way to undermine the ceasefire.

Hamas's main tactical goal ever since its foundation has been to thwart any peace settlement that permanently divides the former colonial territory of Palestine between Jewish and Palestinian states (or even more improbably, creates a single democratic state with seven million Jews and seven million Palestinians).

The organization's longer-term objective has always been the eradication of Israel and the creation of an Islamic state ?from the (Jordan) river to the sea', but that has never been an attainable goal. Hamas's principal task in the present has been just to maintain the Palestinian presence in Gaza, and until recently it performed it reasonably well.

Hamas's surviving leaders must now see the murderous attack on Israel two years ago as a grave strategic blunder. The goal was presumably to reignite fading Arab support for the Palestinian cause. The effect was to hand a hard-right Israeli government a pretext for a huge military response that could end with the ethnic cleansing of all Gaza.

It took some time for the Israeli prime minister to realize that such an extreme policy was feasible, but Donald Trump's victory in last November's US election opened up new perspectives.

Netanyahu had to cater to the new president's lust for a Nobel Prize by agreeing to a ceasefire in Gaza in January, but by March he was confident enough of his ability to manipulate Trump to break the ceasefire and begin the explosive dehousing of the entire population of Gaza.

Trump's last-minute burst of ?peacemaking' early this month (just before he didn't win the Nobel Prize) forced Netanyahu to agree to a new ceasefire. Hamas also agreed to it, because it desperately needed a break to rebuild its force. But neither party is dreaming of a permanent peace settlement.

Hamas's troops were back out on Gaza's shattered streets to reassert their control of the population as soon as the IDF's soldiers pulled back, and suspected ?collaborators' with the Israeli occupation are already being executed. Full enforcement of the ?twenty-point deal' would involve the abolition of Hamas, so that cannot happen without violence.

Netanyahu will want to resume the process of concentrating the Palestinians in a small southwestern corner of Gaza near the Egyptian border as soon as possible, as a prelude to sending them abroad. This, too, would require a resumption of the violence, and Hamas could probably be relied upon to provide a pretext.

As for the majority of Israelis, who neither love nor trust the man who has been their leader for most of the past quarter-century, they have never cared much about the suffering of the Palestinians of Gaza. They will be losing interest in the whole process of removing the Palestinians now that all of the living Israeli hostages have come home.

Similarly, the external pressure on Netanyahu from a Nobel-hungry Trump has dropped as the president wanders off in search of fresh peace to make. (Today, when I'm writing this, is Saturday so it must be Budapest.)

The Israeli prime minister has learned not to embarrass Trump (attacking Qatar is what put him in the doghouse in the first place), and he can still steer the older man in almost any direction he wants. The Israeli army is still in the field, and he would prefer to restart the war sooner than to send most of them home and have to call them back again later.

Which is not to say that the ceasefire will definitely end soon. Just that it probably will.