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Gaza: Not quite the final solution

by GWYNNE DYER

?Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas [from Qatar],? Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin ?Bibi' Netanyahu told the parliamentary members of his Likud Party in 2019. They were questioning his policy of backing Hamas, and he was explaining why.

Keeping the Palestinians divided between Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the West Bank was essential to avoid any revival of the ?two-state solution' that the rest of the world has been advocating since the 1990s.

Hamas are Islamist fanatics who oppose sharing Palestine with the Jews, just as right-wing Israelis reject sharing it with the Palestinians. So there was a deal to be made, and Netanyahu made it.

But it turned out that Hamas was only pretending. It took the money and played along until 7 October 2023, when it launched the surprise attack that killed 1,200 Israelis and took 250 hostages. Netanyahu would normally have been hounded out of politics for that blunder, but he's still there.

He's still in power because he's now a war leader and the courts can't hold an inquiry into Netanyahu's behaviour until the war is over. They can't even conclude his ongoing trial for fraud, breach of trust and bribery until then.

The war is Netanyahu's friend, but is that the only reason why it continues? I raise this question because ?sources close to Netanyahu' are now saying that ?the die has been cast. We're going for the full conquest of the Gaza Strip ? and defeating Hamas.?

There are two versions of Netanyahu. One is Bibi as the Artful Dodger, the amoral master tactician who can get himself out of any scrape but has no permanent allies or goals.

The other is a more sinister character whose goal has always been the expulsion of all Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and ultimately from the West Bank as well. So which one is he? I can't fully believe in either version for very long, but a mixture of the two is more plausible.

If Netanyahu really wants to defeat Hamas, for example, he must reckon with the fact that every militant the Israel Defence Force (IDF) kills probably creates two more young recruits dedicated to revenge. The only plausible solution is to expel them all from the Gaza Strip ? but since the IDF doesn't know who the new recruits will be, only expelling all the Palestinians will suffice.

By happy coincidence that's just what the more radical members of his shaky coalition want anyway: two fixes for the price of one. And so it goes, motives and goals meshing and clashing: history as a pinball game. But there is one constant that suggests a bigger and more coherent plan is at work in Gaza. It is Israel's control of Gaza's food supply.

Gaza is too small and crowded ever to be fully self-sufficient in food, but Israeli destruction of its agriculture and a ban on fishing have made it wholly dependent on food brought in from outside. It's all controlled by Israel. Twenty years ago the ration was calculated as a minimum of 2,279 calories a day, or 1.84 kilograms per person.

?The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet,? said then-prime minister Ehud Olmert, ?but not to make them die of hunger.? Now, however, the target is barely one kg. per person a day, and the violence around the food distribution sites in the Strip is killing between 50 to 100 people a day.

So far, the daily deaths from starvation are only about one-tenth as many. That will shift over the next month or so, because famine deaths do not grow in a linear fashion. They hit a tipping point and then, aided by the spread of disease among starving people with

damaged immune systems, they rise almost exponentially.

At that point Netanyahu's government will have to juggle two priorities: keep the misery and death high enough to motivate large numbers of Gazans to accept ?voluntary' migration to other countries, but hold the famine deaths down below the level where even Donald Trump would feel obliged to call a halt to the process. A tricky business, but doable if you can fine-tune the food supply.

It's not the death camps of Nazi Germany, but it is still a genocide. As Yuli Nocak, director of the Israel-based human rights organization B'Tselem said last week, ?What we see is a clear, intentional attack on civilians in order to destroy a group. I think every human being has to ask himself: ?What do you do in the face of genocide?'?