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Gaza: The 20-point plan

by GWYNNE DYER

When a bad man does a good thing, we should honour him for it even if his motives are selfish.

Donald Trump is only trying to ?bring peace to the Middle East' because he wants the Nobel Prize, they say. He blusters and threatens and lies. He boasts about the seven wars he claims to have settled/ended/avoided, but he cannot even tell the difference between Armenia (which did recently have a war) and Albania (which didn't).

All true, but so what? Trump's motives don't matter, and neither does his geopolitical ignorance. As US president he is the only person with the power to force the Hamas group in Gaza and the current Israeli government to discuss making peace, and after long hesitation he has finally deployed that power.

That certainly does not guarantee success. Neither the Hamas extremists who rule the Gaza Strip nor Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu actually want peace on the terms implicit in Trump's draft 20-point peace plan.

Hamas would definitely welcome a lengthy ceasefire. Most of its leaders and at least half its fighters have been killed in the past two years of fighting. The dead leaders have been replaced by less experienced men and the rank-and-file by new recruits, but there has been a steep drop in their combat efficiency. They need time to rest and rebuild.

However, the draft peace plan does not offer them that. It requires the prompt return of all the Israeli hostages, Hamas's last bargaining chip, in return for nothing except the freedom of 1,950 Palestinians held in Israeli jails and a ceasefire of unspecified length. Israel could arrest them all again if the shooting restarts, and it broke the last cease fire only six months ago.

It gets worse for Hamas if the peace talks make further progress: it would have to hand over all its weapons and disband its organization. This is an Islamist organization whose members truly believe that they will go instantly to paradise if they die in battle with the infidel. They might play for time, but they will always choose glorious death over unconditional surrender.

The resistance to a peace deal is also strong right inside the leadership on the Israeli side. Many Israelis believe that the prime minister needs the war to continue to placate ultra-religious and extreme nationalist members of his cabinet who would bring the government down if he makes any concessions to the Palestinians.

That doubtless plays a major role in ?Bibi' Netanyahu's calculations, but there is also a real ideologue hiding inside the wily and apparently cynical tactician.

That fanatical Bibi was on show last month when he launched what he hoped would be the final offensive in Gaza and urged Israelis to become a ?super-Sparta.' If the expulsion of the Palestinians would lead to an isolated, militarized and widely hated Israel, he implied, that would still be a price worth paying.

Bibi's entire political career has been devoted to preventing the creation of a Palestinian state. Why? Because the emergence of a genuine Palestinian state would foreclose the option of building a ?Greater Israel' by annexing the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and replacing the existing Arab population with Jews.

That project has been doing well recently ? one-quarter of the West Bank's population are now Jewish settlers ? but the Gaza war has created the opportunity for a rapid expulsion of all two million Palestinians in the Strip.

All Netanyahu's actions in Gaza this year, like breaking the last ceasefire, driving Gaza's whole population to the southwest corner of the Strip and starving them, have been directed at making that outcome more likely. However, they were only possible thanks to

Donald Trump's unstinting, unquestioning support.

Sometimes Trump seemed aware of the implications of his actions and unashamed by them: the notion of turning the Strip into a Palestinian-free ?Middle Eastern Riviera', for example. At other times he seemed to be just blindly following Netanyahu's lead. But for the moment, at least, Trump seems fully awake and not at all happy about Netanyahu's genocidal project.

This may not last ? Trump has a very short attention span ? but he was able to bully Netanyahu into at least the opening stages of a ceasefire. However, Bibi will sabotage the process every chance he gets, and the 20-point plan is full of holes he can exploit.

Hamas will also turn against the plan as soon as negotiations get into critical issues like surrendering its weapons and going into exile. The 20-point plan may not be dead on arrival, but it is extremely vulnerable.

There will be some performative peace mongering for a while, but the plan to cleanse Gaza of its Palestinians could be back on track well before the end of the year.