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Israel: The impossible dream

by GWYNNE DYER

A zombie dream has taken over Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government, or at least the extreme right part of it, which is the tail that wags the rest. It is the dream that was once called ?transfer' and is now known as ?relocation.' In its broadest form it includes the expulsion of all Arabs from the lands now controlled by Israel.

Bezalel Smotrich, Israel's current finance minister, is the most articulate exponent of this dream, and he sees the war in Gaza as a heaven-sent opportunity to make it real.

In February he threatened to bring down the coalition if the prime minister did not break the cease fire and stop all food, fuel, water and humanitarian aid to Gaza. The Palestinians should see only ?fire and brimstone? from Israel until the Strip was completely occupied and its population expelled. Netanyahu complied.

In March Smotrich expanded his ambition to include the West Bank as well, warning its three million residents that if they continued to defy Israeli authority, they would face the same fate as the Palestinians of Gaza. ?Their cities too will be uninhabitable ruins,? he said. ?Their residents will be forced to migrate and seek a new life in other countries.?

And in May he hailed the new Israeli ground offensive to seize control of all of Gaza, saying that in six months Gaza would be ?totally destroyed.? The Palestinians there would be ?despairing, understanding that there is no hope and nothing to look for in Gaza, and will be looking for relocation to begin a new life in other places.?

A thoroughly nasty man, then, and so are a number of his cabinet colleagues, but they are not being realistic. All that is very unlikely to happen.

Israel's only real chance to create a Jewish state in all the territory between the Jordan River and the sea was in the Independence War of 1948. Jewish fighters did manage to grab five-sixths of the territory of the former British mandate of Palestine (the UN partition had given Israel only half), but the Egyptian and Jordanian armies managed to hold on to the other sixth.

That other sixth became the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, populated by resident and refugee Palestinians. It was conquered by Israel in the 1967 war, but it was already too late to incorporate those territories into Israel. By then the ban on changing borders by force, already included in the 1945 UN Charter, had been accepted by almost every country in the world.

Ignorant people mock international law, claiming that it is powerless, but it is the reason that the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are still separate territories ?occupied' by Israel. Well, half the reason. The other half is that they are full of Palestinian Arabs, five million of them, and Israel only wants the territory, not the Palestinians.

The dream of a Jewish Israel ?from the river to the sea' never entirely died on the right of Israeli politics, and the apocalyptic tone of much Israeli political discourse these days has brought it roaring back to life. It is, however, just as delusional as ever.

The current strategy of the Israel Defence Force (IDF), if such an incoherent wish-list is worthy of the name, involves starving the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip into leaving the entire territory.

First the two million inhabitants must be reduced to desperation by allowing no food into the Strip (11 weeks, done). Then, on the verge of starvation, they will all be forced down to a small piece of land in the far south of the Strip near the Egyptian border. No food will be delivered elsewhere; they will have to move south to get it. This phase is now beginning.

There will be a ?minimal? amount of food available there, in Netanyahu's words, distributed by Israeli contractors and guarded by

IDF soldiers. Rather than stay in such dreadful circumstances, the starveling Palestinians will then vanish across the border, leaving the Strip free for Israeli resettlement (or Trump's ?Riviera on the Mediterranean', if he still wants it).

This is a cruel fantasy, not a strategy. Egypt, well aware of Netanyahu's intentions, will seal the border tight and allow no Palestinians to cross. If Israel holds two million people there for long, the death toll from hunger and disease will soon reach a thousand a day. Even Israel's closest friends and strongest supporters will rebel.

It's already starting. France, Britain and Canada have condemned Israel's behaviour and threatened sanctions. The European Union is ?reviewing' its free trade agreement with Israel. Even Donald Trump has voiced some concern. Israel will have to change course, or it will become an international pariah. And still the Palestinians won't leave.