

Israel: The widening war

by GWYNNE DYER

There are really two wars in the Middle East, and only one of them is paused. The US-Iran war has been stuck in a ragged ceasefire for more than a month, with the participants only indulging in occasional tit-for-tat strikes that Donald Trump likes to call 'love taps': fewer than five killed.

Israel was part of that war too in March, dropping thousands of bombs on Iran, but Trump then told Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to observe the ceasefire with Iran and he actually did. However, he went right on bombing Hezbollah, a Lebanon-based organization that acts as Iran's proxy in the country, even attacking Israel on Iran's behalf.

It's an odd alliance, based only on the fact that both Iran (92 million people) and the minority of Lebanese who support Hezbollah (fewer than 2 million) follow the same Shia strand of Islam. The real attraction for both groups, probably, is that Shiism is emotionally all about victimhood. For Iranians, it is a historical grievance; for Lebanese Shias, it is omnipresent.

Lebanese Shias are not Palestinians and have no direct grievance with Israel. Their true grievance is that they are impoverished, downtrodden and often despised by the other two-thirds of Lebanese society, who are Sunni Muslims or Christians of various kinds.

A sociologist would probably say that while the Lebanese Shias truly believe they are fighting for the rights of the Palestinian underdogs, their dedicated and heavily armed support for the Palestinian cause is really a way of extorting respect and gaining power over the more privileged parts of Lebanese society.

At any rate, Hezbollah are very tough fighters and a permanent thorn in the side of both the Israelis and the Lebanese state. A 15-year civil war (1975-90) proved that the Lebanese government dares not confront them openly, while Israel is obsessed with them since their home territory, the southern third of Lebanon, is the part that borders directly on Israel.

But now, at last, Binyamin Netanyahu thinks he has discovered a solution to this problem.

Over the past two years the Israel Defence Force (IDF) has methodically destroyed the homes and infrastructure that served two million people in the Gaza Strip. Now the survivors live in tents and most countries in the world call it 'genocide,' but nobody does anything about it.

So why not do the same in southern Lebanon and destroy the home base of that other 'nest of terrorists'? That is precisely what the IDF is doing in southern Lebanon at the moment: ordering the residents to leave and systematically destroying the villages and towns all the way up to Beirut.

They are less than halfway through their work at this point, but the final product will look exactly the same. (The second genocide is always easier.) Trump's endless attempts to avoid the blame for his foolish war may well give the IDF time to finish the demolition job properly, although bits of Hezbollah will doubtless live on under the wreckage.

And meanwhile what about the Gaza Strip, which has been under a kind of ceasefire since last October? There have been only 850 Palestinians killed since the ceasefire, compared to more than 73,000 deaths in the previous two years. However, Hamas is now refusing to disarm (just as everybody who crafted this ceasefire knew it would).

This would give Netanyahu an opportunity to reopen the war and resume the task of driving all the Palestinians of Gaza down to a small enclave in the southwest from which they could be more easily exported to somewhere else entirely.

The October ceasefire interrupted that process, leaving the IDF in sole control of only 60 per cent of the Gaza Strip. Israel's Channel

12 News recently reported that Washington has given Israel ?a green light? to ?resume operations?, presumably to occupy and destroy any remaining built-up areas in the Strip and cleanse it of Palestinians ? but it probably won't happen.

There have been too many interruptions to the grand plan (if there ever was one). Public opinion about incomplete and proposed genocides is shifting even in Israel. Netanyahu is almost certain to lose the October election. Israel has become a pariah country and can no longer demand special treatment because of its tragic past.

There is a way back, of course, but none of the men who are likely to form the coalition that evicts Netanyahu from office ? Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid, and Gadi Eisenkot ? seem inclined to do penance for his behaviour in office. It will be a long way back.

NB: The crime of genocide is not confined to death camps and gas chambers. It includes ?specific acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group.?