

Israel's Curse

by GWYNNE DYER

Six Jewish hostages were murdered by Hamas last week just before the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) reached them, and a controversy has erupted in Israel about whether Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu should have done more to save them. But only among the ignorant and the credulous, because everybody else knew he never intended to save them.

If your child is kidnapped and you get a ransom note, do you

(A) pay the ransom if you can possibly raise the money, informing the police only after your child is safe; or do you

(B) ask the police to find and free the child, accepting the risk that she might get killed in the process; or do you

(C) write the child off, as you have other priorities that take precedence?

Most parents would choose option (A) if they could afford it and option (B) if they could not. Almost none would choose option (C). But politicians are dealing with other people's children, and the calculations are different.

When Hamas fighters from the Gaza Strip attacked Israel last October, killing 1,200 Israelis and taking 250 others back to the Strip as hostages, Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu owed the latter group a duty of care, but it wasn't unlimited.

Option (A) was politically unavailable to Netanyahu. He could not afford to pay the Hamas kidnappers off, because their price would be the complete and permanent withdrawal of all Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip.

In current circumstances, no Israeli leader could sell that outcome to Israeli voters, Netanyahu's coalition government would crumble, there would be a general election, and he would lose.

Option (C) was also off-limits, at least as an openly declared policy. He could not publicly write off the hostages as a lost cause, because that was an emotionally unacceptable conclusion for a large proportion of Israel's Jewish voters.

For public consumption, therefore, Netanyahu adopted Option (B): ask the police (or actually the army, in this case) to find the hostages and liberate them, although he must have known privately that they would be killed before they could be rescued.

This is a reality that is often ignored by the hostages' families and their supporters. The kidnappers in this case are not random criminals but trained and fanatical soldiers. They are holding the hostages in tunnels as much as twenty metres underground. Of course they will kill the hostages before Israeli soldiers reach them. There is no real Option (B).

These are the facts, and they would have forced Netanyahu to write off the hostages or agree to a cease-fire even if he were a wise and honest man. He is neither, of course.

He is a man facing likely conviction in three criminal trials for corruption that have been interrupted because of the war. Conviction could carry a jail sentence, so he is in no hurry for the trials to resume.

He is a man who is playing for time, because the longer the time between last October's Hamas attacks and the date when the inquiry opens into his responsibility for not preventing that disaster, the better for him. Something else might turn up: a Trump election victory, a war with Iran that drags the Americans in, anything that changes the subject.

He is a man who, eleven months into the war, has yet to give a single hint about how he thinks the Gaza Strip should be governed

when the war ends. Not even addressing the issue postpones the evil day when the reality of a cease-fire and a peace settlement must be discussed and decided.

He wants to avoid that day because his coalition is critically dependent on an extreme right-wing party which relies on the turmoil of the war to distract attention from its campaign to drive as many Palestinians as possible out of the occupied West Bank.

'Today, we have power in the government,' said National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, a leading light of that far-right group. 'I'm not ashamed to say that we're using this power to prevent a reckless deal and to stop any negotiations altogether.' To prevent any deal and any negotiations at all, in fact.

There were big pro-cease-fire demonstrations on the day after the murdered hostages were found, including up to 5% of the Israeli population. There was a six-hour 'national strike' by the country-wide trade union Histadrut on the following day, but they tamely shut it down when the courts ruled that it was 'political'.

Netanyahu is Israel's curse, but he and his strategy are safe at least until the US election in November, and a lot longer if Trump wins then. Nothing Joe Biden can bring himself to do or say in the meantime will change that.