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Mowing the lawn again

by GWYNNE DYER

The two-day Israeli military incursion into the Palestinian city of Jenin in the northern West Bank (12 Palestinians killed, one Israeli dead) seems at first glance like just another example of ?mowing the lawn'. That's what the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) call these periodic futile raids they make to kill some Palestinian fighters.

They know perfectly well that the raids achieve nothing except to bring in more young recruits for the Palestinian resistance movement-of-the-month: Lion's Den, the Jenin Brigades or whatever's next. But they're IDF soldiers and they have to look like they're doing something about the ?terrorist threat', so out come the lawn-mowers.

The Jenin raid is not even a very big deal as these things go, although the air strikes were new. The first battle of Jenin, during the Second Intifada in 2002, was a much bigger affair (23 Israelis killed, 50 Palestinian dead). But there is a widespread suspicion that this particular battle is part of a much bigger plan.

Israeli politics can sometimes be full of surprises, but not this time. It is as predictable as a Noh play moving towards its tragic conclusion. In fact, it is so easy to predict that I actually did exactly that right here four months ago. With your indulgence, here are the predictions again.

1. Prime Minister Binyamin ?Bibi' Netanyahu will not go to jail.

2. The independence of the Israeli court system will be destroyed. Judges' decisions will be made subject to veto by politicians. (That's why Bibi will stay free.)

3. There will be a ?Third Intifada', involving the deaths of thousands of Palestinians and dozens or perhaps even a few hundred Israelis.

4. The new Israeli government will not strive officiously to head off this disaster, because it will distract domestic and international opinion enough to permit a very large expansion of the Jewish settlement project in the occupied West Bank.

5. Neither the United States nor Israel's new Arab friends (the ?Abraham Accords' and all that) will put major pressure on Netanyahu's government to stop that from happening. They both have bigger fish to fry elsewhere.

6. There will not be a civil war. As Anshel Pfeffer wrote last week in Ha'aretz: ?For all Israel's problems, life here is still too good, for all of Israeli communities, to risk a civil war. Losing what is left of Israel's fragile and limited democracy will be a terrible blow for many, perhaps even most, Israelis ? but it won't be worth going to actual war for.?

So then, how did I do? Netanyahu is still free, and will be so long as his coalition with the religious right and settler parties survives. With their support, he is renewing his attempt to ?overhaul' (i.e. neuter) Israel's Supreme Court after many weeks of mass protests forced him to suspend the project in April.

Netanyahu still faces a major risk of being convicted of corruption offenses in his ongoing criminal trial, so ensuring that his government gains the right to override any court decision against him is his highest priority. That's why he made his deal with the settler extremists in the first place, but it's going to take a war as well: the ?Third Intifada'.

Big military confrontations with ?terrorists' will distract lots of people who otherwise might start protesting again about the strangulation of Israeli democracy, so they serve Netanyahu's purposes. They also serve the settlers' agenda of seizing ever more Palestinian land, which is more easily done when Palestinians and Israelis are busy killing one another.

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, the senior settler in Netanyahu's cabinet, is calling for ?a military operation to take down buildings, exterminate terrorists ? not one or two but tens and hundreds, if necessary thousands.? ?Hilltop youth', as Jewish vigilantes in the West Bank are known, will provide the provocations, and the IDF will do the clearances.

That's the plan, and so far it's going well. President Biden strongly disapproves of the company Netanyahu keeps, but he is not going to waste his limited political capital on trying to protect the Palestinians. Israel's Arab ?frenemies' (Egypt and the Gulf countries) aren't up for a fight either, although the relationship is rapidly cooling.

Is there going to be a civil war among Israelis? Of course not. Anshel Pfeffer is still right: secular or religious, right-wing or the dwindling left, they all have it too good .

And will it all eventually end in tears? Of course it will. Just not yet. Probably not for quite a long while yet.

Predicting all this took neither special knowledge nor a gift for prophecy. It was practically written on the walls, and anybody who was paying attention knew it four months ago. People just didn't want to hear it, and they still don't.