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Netanyahu?s game

by GWYNNE DYER

Democrats in the United States and most people who are paying attention elsewhere in the world were greatly relieved when President Joe Biden quit his re-election campaign two weeks ago and let Vice-President Kamala Harris run instead. They don't really know much about her, but they know she is not Donald Trump.

Harris now has a good chance of overtaking Trump in the presidential race, but only so long as the United States does not get dragged into a big war in the Middle East. However, she is not in charge of US foreign policy. Biden is still running that, and he still seems incapable of saying no to Israel no matter what it does.

What Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is doing at the moment is systematically crossing the ?red lines' laid down by Israel's most dangerous enemies, Iran and its proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

In conventional military terms, that doesn't make sense. The Israel Defence Forces are already heavily engaged in fighting Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israeli troops are tired, and the economy is suffering from the repeated call-ups of reservists. The army doesn't want to open up another front.

Hezbollah and the Israeli army have been involved in a low-intensity exchange of rockets and artillery fire across Israel's northern border ever since Hamas's attack on Israel last October. However, the targets on both sides were limited to the first twenty km. beyond the border, where most civilians have been evacuated. No attacks on Beirut, no attacks on Tel Aviv.

Iran, with 90 million people and an Islamist government, could be an existential threat to Israel if it had nuclear weapons, but it has deliberately stopped just short of that technology. It supports various Arab members of the ?Axis of Resistance' with money and weapons, but it avoids direct clashes with Israel and the two do not have a common border.

So it is obviously in Israel's interest to maintain the status quo with Hezbollah and Iran ? and yet Netanyahu has begun trying to undermine it.

His first initiative was a missile strike four months ago that killed two Iranian generals and five other officers who were visiting Iran's embassy in Syria. Israel often ?deniably' assassinates Iranian officers, officials and scientists, but this was a direct challenge that was certain to evoke an Iranian military response.

Neither Teheran nor Washington wanted to get drawn into a war, however, so they coordinated a charade in which Iran launched 300 missiles and drones against Israel but all of them were shot down or missed their targets. Honour was satisfied, Netanyahu was thwarted, and nobody died.

But then in July, Joe Biden pulled out of the presidential race, Kamala Harris became the candidate, and the prospect of a less blindly supportive US ally loomed on the horizon. How best to ensure that Harris doesn't win and Netanyahu's friend Donald Trump becomes president instead? Drag the US into a war with Iran before the election.

A pretext for that soon presented itself in the form of a random Hezbollah missile in the usual tit-for-tat along the Israeli-Lebanese border that killed a dozen young Druze who were playing football. It wasn't unusual and it probably wasn't even deliberately targeted at the football field, but it gave Netanyahu the excuse he needed.

On the night of July 30-31, Israeli missiles flew to Beirut, Hezbollah's red line, to kill Fuad Shukr, Hezbollah's second-in-command. Only hours later an Israeli missile or bomb (accounts vary) killed Hamas's political head, Ismail Haniyeh ? and it killed him in Tehran, to ensure that Iran also felt obliged to retaliate.

To people unfamiliar with the way the game is played in the Middle East, this account may sound paranoid, or even specifically anti-Israeli. It is not. I offer in defence the analysis by Alon Pinkas in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz on 1 August.

?Israel could have killed Haniyeh anywhere in the Middle East. yet chose to do so in Tehran during the inauguration of the new president...Israel left Tehran no alternative but to retaliate.?

?Who has no interest in such an escalation? The United States, whose makeshift Middle East policy will now have to be revisited, and Iran, which clearly prefers attrition and low intensity.?

?Who does have a vested interest in an expanded war? Mr. Netanyahu. Which is why the conventional wisdom in Washington over the last 36 hours is that Israel carried out the Haniyeh assassination deliberately in Iran and intentionally on that day.?

And what is dear old Joe Biden doing? He's sending another aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean to ?defend Israel' (and maybe fight Iran) when he should be using the leverage of the $6.5 billion of extra military aid Washington has sent Israel since last October to force a ceasefire in Gaza.