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Netanyahu?s remaining options

by GWYNNE DYER

?The graveyards are full of indispensable men,? said former French Premier Georges Clemenceau about a century ago, and it's still true. Israel's precisely timed surprise attack on Iran on 28 February killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and seven of his closest allies in thirty seconds, but they turned out not to be indispensable at all.

?The problem is that Israel is in love with assassinations ? and we never learn that it is not the solution. We have killed all the leaders of Hamas. They are still there. It's the same with Hezbollah. The leaders are always replaced,? said Israeli intelligence analyst Yossi Melman. And so they have been again with Iran.

Prime Minister Binyamin ?Bibi' Netanyahu's ?decapitation' attack went off perfectly: the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) even managed to kill forty senior leaders in other parts of Iran at the same time. And yet all those assassinations achieved precisely nothing: the next tier of Iranian leaders just moved up, and the population did not rise up against them.

Netanyahu has been trying to get the United States to attack Iran, Israel's most powerful enemy, ever since the early 1990s. He warned each passing US president that if he didn't act right away, Iran would have nuclear weapons in two years, or three, or five. But since it wasn't true (as US intelligence agencies always said), he never made a sale ? until Donald Trump.

Trump goes all fanboy when dealing with political strongmen like Kim Jong Un, Vladimir Putin and Binyamin Netanyahu. However, even he could see that Bibi's warnings about imminent Iranian nuclear weapons were implausible, since Trump claimed that he destroyed all of Iran's enriched nuclear material by precision bombing last year.

Nevertheless, Netanyahu made the sale in the end. Trump was still high on his January takeover of Venezuela; he was easily persuaded that the people of Iran would revolt if he just gave the signal, and Netanyahu told him that the Iranian regime would magically get nuclear weapons in a week if he didn't act. (Probably neither man really believed that, but it helped.)

Even then, Trump balked for a moment at the end, but Netanyahu threatened to attack Iran without American help if necessary, and he gave in.

As US Secretary of State Marco Rubio put it, ?We knew that there was going to be Israeli action. We knew that that would precipitate an (Iranian) attack against American forces, and we knew that if we didn't pre-emptively go after them before they launched those attacks, we would suffer higher casualties,? Rubio told reporters.

Alternatively, of course, Trump could have just ordered Netanyahu not to start an illegal and foredoomed war against Iran, but that would have required a personality transplant. So the US and the IDF bombed and rocketed Iran for six weeks, killing at least 3,500 people, with no tangible effect ? while Iran just closed the Strait of Hormuz and won the war.

Donald Trump can walk away from this fiasco humiliated before the rest of the world but relatively undamaged at home. People who vote for him don't follow or care about what happens in the Middle East unless the war starts up again. Whereas Netanyahu's political survival, and maybe even his freedom, depend on his getting the war going again.

The Israeli election is due by October, and voters blame Netanyahu for failing to prevent the Hamas atrocities in 2023 and also for not winning the war against Iran. The latest opinion polls show his Likud-led coalition and the likeliest opposition coalition neck and neck, with neither winning enough seats for a majority in the Knesset (parliament).

To stay in office and avoid jail (as he faces criminal corruption charges), Netanyahu needs a military victory. For that, he needs the war to restart. And that means he must defy Donald Trump, who wants the Strait of Hormuz fully open and some face-saving deal

with Iran before he has to face American voters in the November mid-term elections.

Netanyahu can't really win a new war, but he needs at least to look like he might win it when Israelis vote in October, so he's doubling down on all his scariest themes. He told Channel 14 last week that he decided to attack Iran twice (June 2025 and February 2026) to save Israel ?from annihilation by atomic bombs, which were already in their possession.?

That's utter nonsense, but it's all he has left. Can he really restart the war and bring Trump along, or even do it without him? Probably not, but he's certainly going to try.