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Objective Allies: Netanyahu and Hamas

by GWYNNE DYER

?Objective allies' generally don't even talk to each other. They don't have common values, their ultimate goals may be completely incompatible, they often hate each other. But they share some intermediate goal,and are clever enough to realise they can both get what they want by acting together in certain ways.

Sometimes those ways may even involve shooting at each other, but if acting that way brings a result that serves their variouspurposes, they are still objective allies.So Binyamin Netanyahu, still prime minister of Israel despite his parlous political position,and Hamas, the Islamist Palestinianorganisation that controls the Gaza Strip, are objective allies.

Right now the missiles are flying and people are dying in both the Gaza Strip and Israel, and as usual it's hard to say who or what started it. Was it the Israeli air strikes that hit 150 targets in Gaza and killed around thirty people including nine children on Tuesday? Or the Hamas fighters who launched 130 of their homemade missiles at Israeli towns earlier in the day and killed three Israelis?

Or the Israeli police who fired stun grenadesMonday night at Palestinian demonstrators taking shelter in the al-Aqsa mosque on what Israelis call Temple Mount? Or the Palestinianprotesters who threw rocks and other missilesat the police every night during the lastweek of Ramadan? Or the founders of Hamas in 1987, or the authors of the Balfour Declaration in 1917?

Never mind who started it. The rightquestion is: who benefits from what ishappening right now? It's the same old ?objective allies' who have been playing this game for a quarter-century already: Hamas and Netanyahu. And yes, they do hate each other, but nevertheless....

Consider Netanyahu's position. For the fourth time in a row, he has just failed toget an election outcome that will let himcreate and lead a coalition government.He is on trial on serious corruption charges, and may go to jail if he does not remain prime minister.

The opposition parties that want to see Netanyahu gone now have a month to tryto make a different coalition that excludes him, but they have a problem. The electoralarithmetic means that their coalition must contain the United Arab List (UAL), one of the parties that represent Israel's20% minority of Arab citizens.

No Arab party has ever been part of an Israeli government before, so putting this coalition together was already quite tricky. Doing it while Israelis and Palestinians are killing each other is impossible. UAL Chairman Mansour Abbas has alreadysuspended the talks with his potentialJewish coalition partners.

If these coalition talks fail, Israel will have to have another election (the fifth in thirty months) next autumn. Netanyahu will remain prime minister in the meantime, and will then have another, fifth chance to get a durable right-wing majority coalition thatwill pass legislation safeguarding him from further prosecution.

I can't read Netanyahu's mind, but ifhe were a ruthlessly self-serving politicianhe would certainly find this little warpolitically useful. How about his alleged ?objective ally', Hamas?

Hamas needs a war right now less than Netanyahu does, but it's always up for one. Its business model is perpetual rejectionof peace with Israel, in the expectationthat divine intervention will one day deliver total victory and eliminate the Jewish state.

Hamas is therefore in permanent competition with Fatah, the rival Palestinianpolitical movement that accepted the(now moribund) ?two-state solution' which envisaged Israeli and Palestinian states living side by side. A little war with Israel now and then is good forHamas's image.

The Hamas-Netanyahu ?objective alliance' is based on the fact that Netanyahu hates the idea of atwo-state solution just as much as Hamas does. Indeed, they began by stranglingthat deal together in 1995-96, and mostof the shooting since has been aboutkeeping it dead.

The deal came out of the Oslo Accord of 1992, in which Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat agreed to move towards two parallel states living in peace.

Rabin was assassinated by a Jewishright-wing extremist, but everybody expected his successor, Shimon Peres, to win the 1996 election on a sympathy vote and go through with the Oslo deal. Instead, Hamas went on a terrorist spree, bombing buses in Israel to cause maximum casualties,in order to drive Israeli voters into thearms of the anti-Oslo Accords nationalist right instead.

It succeeded, and the right-wing candidate, ex-commando Binyamin Netanyahu, became prime minister instead and sabotaged the ?peace process'. It was never very likely to succeed, but Hamas and Netanyahu both act as objective allies whenever the corpse of the two-state solution threatens to rise from its shallow grave.