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Qatar and Poland

by GWYNNE DYER

I'll get to the Russian drones shot down over Poland, but I'll start with the Israeli air strikes on Qatar because that's a much bigger deal.

Israel has bombed Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Yemen repeatedly in the past few months, so hitting Qatar might seem like just one more demonstration that Israel can now attack any country in the Middle East with impunity. Yes, Qatar is America's closest ally in the Gulf, but so what?

What makes it such a big deal is that Qatar was hosting the arms-length talks between Israel and Hamas on a cease-fire in Gaza, where a huge new Israeli ?final offensive' is underway. Prime Minister Binyamin ?Bibi' Netanyahu's target in Qatar was precisely the exiled Hamas leaders with whom Israel was negotiating the cease-fire.

The usual panels of ?experts' were soon on the air ? the statutory politicians from left and right, somebody from a local think-tank, maybe a retired general too ? trying to explain why Israel did that without mentioning the one screamingly obvious reason: that Netanyahu wanted to avoid a cease-fire.

Killing the other side's negotiators is a sure-fire way of ending the talks, even if Israel's air strikes don't get the most senior ones. It also puts every Arab country (and Iran) on notice that nobody is safe: the dwarf superpower of the Middle East can cross every red line, and even Donald Trump can't (or at least won't) rein it in.

It was almost comical watching the television experts try to slide by the obvious questions without saying the unsayable. Why did the Israelis try to kill the people they were negotiating with? Why didn't they give the United States advance warning? What was Netanyahu really thinking? And what happens next?

Good questions, and they all have obvious answers. However, for some reason none of the television experts seemed to know the answers. It was Monty Python time: grown-up men and women with impressive job titles diligently searching high and low (with no success) for answers so blindingly bright and clear that they should have been wearing sunglasses.

Netanyahu tried to kill the Palestinian negotiators because he wants his ?final offensive' to drive all two million surviving Palestinians in Gaza into a tiny corner of the Strip, and thence into permanent exile. A cease-fire would stall that process.

There was a risk, however small, that Hamas might return all the remaining Israeli hostages, agree to disarm, and voluntarily go into exile, because the only alternative is exile for all Palestinians. Hamas has rarely been that rational, but it was a risk that had to be stamped out.

Why tell President Trump about the strike only at the last minute? Because there was a risk, also very small, that he would put his foot down and say no if given early warning. As in his dealings with Vladimir Putin, the harshest thing Trump is normally able to say to Netanyahu is that he is ?not happy', but why take a chance?

And what was Netanyahu really thinking? Over the past six months he has probably come to realize that Donald Trump's presidency is presenting him with an unexpected historical opportunity to end the ?Palestinian problem' by expelling all the Palestinians from what would then become Greater Israel.

Yes, the Gaza war has allowed him to stay in power politically, to evade responsibility for letting the murderous Hamas attack happen on his watch, and to at least postpone his final rendezvous with the courts and possible jail time, but these are now probably minor issues in his mind. He is in full messianic mode, unilaterally deciding Israel's Future.

First, clear out the Gaza Strip and send its inhabitants to Libya or Somaliland or wherever will take them (with enough financial inducements). The three million Palestinians in the West Bank will rise up in anger, so then Israel can expel them too.

There will be huge international opprobrium and doubtless some boycotts and sanctions. The ?Abraham Accords' will crumble, but that's a small price to pay. And Trump will protect Israel from the worst of it and maybe get his ?Riviera' in Gaza as a reward.

People will call it a genocide and technically they will be right, but it doesn't require actually killing millions of Palestinians. Tens of thousands, yes, but not millions. Besides, time heals all wounds; who talks about the Armenians now?

I have no access to Netanyahu's secret thoughts, but what he says and does would serve these ambitions.

As for armed Russian drones over Poland: investigate. If it was a malfunction, send Moscow a stiff complaint. If it was a deliberate provocation, consider basing European NATO fighters and surface-to-air missiles in Poland to shoot down Russian ballistic and cruise missiles over Ukrainian-controlled territory.

And stay calm. It's a long game.