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Strategy to stay out of jail

by GWYNNE DYER

Israel's prime minister, Binyamin ?Bibi' Netanyahu, has just asked the country's president, Isaac Herzog, to ?fully pardon? him of all three charges ? bribery, fraud and breach of trust ? that he has been on trial for since 2020. And the question is: why did he only ask for it now?

The alleged crimes were the kind of petty malpractice that often trips up politicians: accepting gifts (mostly cigars and champagne) from powerful businessmen and bribing media for positive coverage. However, a former Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, served 18 months in jail after conviction on similar charges, so Netanyahu does have a potential problem.

He has dealt with the charges for the past five years by delaying tactics in court and latterly by requesting endless postponements on the grounds that he was too busy fighting a war in the Gaza Strip. But there is currently a cease-fire in Gaza, which some people hope can be turned into a peace deal and reconstruction of the devastated homes of its 2.3 million people.

The cease-fire intensifies Bibi's legal problem, however, since he can no longer plausibly demand postponements in the trial proceedings because there is a war on. Moreover, there must be an election for the next Knesset (parliament) by next October, and according to current opinion polls Netanyahu's coalition is unlikely to win.

But why are Israeli voters so ungrateful? Didn't Bibi win the war, crush the Palestinians and get all the hostages back? Well, yes, but he was also the man in charge on 7 October the year before last when Hamas fighters took Israel by surprise and murdered more than 1,200 Israelis in their own homes. A great many people have not forgiven him for that.

In Israel major government failures like this usually end up before an independent state commission of inquiry led by a retired judge. That would be political death for Netanyahu: his mistaken belief that he had tamed Hamas by letting large sums of money reach it from Arab sources was why Israel was so unprepared for the October attack.

Bibi has neutered that threat for the time being by putting himself in charge of the inquiry, but he could not hope to keep that position if there is a different government in Israel after the elections. Indeed, his whole agenda for creating a Palestinian-free Gaza, building on Donald Trump's project for a ?Middle Eastern Riviera', would go out the window if he loses power.

Netanyahu seemed very close to his goal in September, but Trump himself then forced Bibi to accept the cease-fire, implicitly abandoning his ?Riviera' project in the process. (Why did Trump do that? Maybe he was swayed by pity for the Palestinians, or perhaps he just realised that the Saudi Arabians were getting very unhappy about it.)

At any rate, the best solution for all Netanyahu's problems, legal, strategic and political, would be a resumption of the war in Gaza. He could go back to stalling court hearings on his corruption charges, he could get started on pushing Palestinians out of Gaza, perhaps he could even win the elections next year if the expulsions went well enough.

The only big obstacle to all that is Donald Trump, who now sees the cease-fire in Gaza as one of his major achievements. It's going nowhere politically, and even in terms of stopping the killing it's not very effective: in November Israeli forces killed at least 300 Palestinians in Gaza, most of them civilians. But Trump is quite protective about it, so Bibi must wait.

He can't do that indefinitely, but he can probably do it for long enough. He is both patient and persistent whereas Trump is neither. Netanyahu will jump through as many hoops as necessary, fly to Washington to kiss the ring whenever it's required, and sooner or later Trump will go chasing off after some other shiny object.

It should be easy to restart the war in Gaza once Trump is sufficiently distracted. Hamas fighters know that they will lose as badly in

any future fighting as they did in the last round, but most of them will probably choose to die on their feet rather than live on their knees.

Israeli reservists might be a bit harder to motivate for yet another round of the war, but the habit of duty plus the promise of a mass expulsion of Palestinians at least from Gaza would probably be enough to get most of them back out one more time.

I'm not saying that all of this is bound to happen. I'm just saying that these are probably Binyamin Netanyahu's calculations at this moment in time ? and that they are entirely rational and realistic, if perhaps a bit ruthless.

They are barking up the wrong tree. Taiwan's land defences need some work, but it is a very big island with few usable beaches, and its submarines and missiles would decimate Chinese sea transports. Meanwhile, the bulk of the US Navy would be a thousand km. offshore in the western Pacific and the South China Sea, blocking all ocean-borne trade to and from China.

No nukes, no conquest of Taiwan, and a dodgy future for the regime in Beijing that rolled the dice. The current regime in Beijing are not fools, so East Asia will probably remain at peace.