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Export date: Thu Oct 15 5:26:12 2026 / +0000 GMT

The charade

by GWYNNE DYER

Last month US President Donald Trump announced ?a monumental step toward lasting peace and security? in Gaza. Mediators from the ?Board of Peace', his sketchy rival to the United Nations, had persuaded Hamas, the Palestinian armed resistance movement, to accept his ?15-point document' for Hamas disarmament and Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

[You may object to my use of the phrase ?armed resistance movement' instead of ?evil crazy terrorists', but you would then be obliged to write an original 500-word essay explaining why you believe that the Stern Gang (Lehi) in the 1940s, the Viet Cong in the 1960s and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s were (or were not) ?evil crazy terrorists'.]

Three days after Trump's announcement the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) bombed the Gaza Strip again, killing 18 Palestinians. But don't get me wrong; this is not a piece about the perfidious and wicked Israelis. They are wicked and perfidious, of course, but so are Hamas's leaders. In this kind of war, the leaders on both sides have to lie and cheat all the time.

While neither side is averse to using violence, they use it sparingly most of the time, because both sides need the support or at least the sympathy of the United States to achieve their goals. The result is a charade in which the leaders on both sides pretend to want peace while carefully sabotaging any step that might make peace possible.

The current round of this long-running sham began with Hamas's decision to tell Trump's people that they were ready to disarm completely as long as the Israelis entirely withdraw from the Gaza Strip. This was a safe move, since they knew that Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu would never do that. They just wanted to smoke him out.

Netanyahu faces an election in two months, and his only chance of winning it is to retain the trust of the extreme right parties who want to drive all the Palestinians out of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. He doesn't actually have to do that right now but he must at least look like he wants to do it, so withdrawing from the Gaza Strip would be electoral suicide.

Hamas's move worked. After playing for time as long as possible, Netanyahu said last Sunday (9 August) that ?Israel does not accept the ?15-point document'.? And that's it, at least until the Israeli election and probably afterwards as well, because most other coalitions that might replace Netanyahu's would be equally adamant about not leaving Gaza.

So what has been accomplished by all this back and forth? Just point-scoring, really. Hamas comes out of this exchange looking a bit more reasonable than the Israeli government, but that is an optical illusion. It plays a bad hand very well, but in the end, it is just as extreme, just as uncompromising, just as driven by religion as the radicals around Netanyahu.

And just as marginal, now that the big boys have come out to play. The future of the Middle East will be decided by the United States and Iran, with major supporting roles for Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Pakistan. Israel will have only a bit part, doing whatever Washington tells it to do.

However, this is where the crystal ball goes dark. ?Washington' is actually just Donald Trump, and we do not know what he will do. We can't, because he does not know from one day to the next himself, but he is desperate and it could be very big.

Bear in mind what he has done already. He has driven all the Gulf states to revise their view of the United States as a reliable ally. Saudi Arabia has even ordered him to stop US air attacks on Iran from Saudi bases.

He has inadvertently brought a younger, more radical, more ruthless generation to power in Iran, and they take vindictive pleasure in thwarting his efforts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Own goal. And when they do reopen the Strait, Trump will hate the deal.

He has caused the three other big powers of western Asia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to form an alliance under the Mecca Agreement. That's almost 400 million people, all pledged to defend any member that comes under attack, and that includes defence with Pakistan's 170 nuclear weapons.

And Trump might yet convince the Iranian regime that it will never be safe without nuclear weapons of its own.

So all is still to play for, as they say.