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The Middle East: Where next?

by GWYNNE DYER

In the 80 hours between Wednesday, Jan. 15, when the Gaza ceasefire agreement was announced, and Sunday, Jan. 19, when it went into effect, Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip killed 123 Palestinians including dozens of women and children. The Israel Defence Force (IDF) said it had tried to avoid civilian casualties, but it had to kill the ?terrorists' of Hamas wherever they were.

Now, of course, it has to stop killing them, at least for a while. 33 Israelis will be freed by Hamas over the next few weeks in return for 1,890 Palestinian prisoners. However, much of the IDF and even members of Prime Minister Binyamin ?Bibi' Netanyahu's own cabinet expect to go back to war after the first phase of the hostage exchange.

The second phase will be much harder for Netanyahu's supporters and allies to swallow. It requires complete withdrawal of the IDF from the Gaza Strip and the use of Hamas members as a sort of police force (mostly unarmed) to facilitate the return of more than a million Palestinians, already many times displaced, to their wrecked homes in the northern part of the territory.

That's the stage when the cease-fire is likely to break down, because hard-line Israelis will see it as a defeat. In fact, two far-right cabinet ministers voted against the cease-fire and said that they will quit and bring Netanyahu's coalition government down unless the war resumes after the first phase ends.

The cynics are therefore convinced that Netanyahu will first take credit for the hostage exchange to reduce the domestic political pressure on him, then use a real or faked violation of the cease-fire by Hamas as an excuse to restart the war. After all, he needs a war if he is to stay out of jail.

Just staying in power and out of jail was a persuasive explanation for his behaviour until quite recently Only the war spared Netanyahu from a devastating inquiry into his failure to foresee and prevent the Hamas attack in October 2023, and it also stalled his ongoing corruption trial.

?We changed the face of the Middle East,? Netanyahu said last week. He's right, and it may give him a new lease on power.

Hamas is leaderless and has lost its Iranian patron. The IDF has devastated Hezbollah in Lebanon and killed its leader. Iran's formerly dominant position in Syria was swept away together with the Assad regime. Even Iran itself has been revealed as a paper tiger in terms of its missiles and its air defences, and there are serious questions about its internal stability.

And now Netanyahu has Donald Trump on his side. Not under his thumb ? Trump's people put huge pressure on Netanyahu to get his final assent to the cease-fire ? but the Israeli leader will have been quick to grasp that new opportunities are opening up for him as the Middle Eastern constellation of powers shifts.

Netanyahu will probably never talk the United States into attacking Iran for him, but he did get Trump to cancel the no-nukes accord with Iran and clamp strict sanctions on the country in 2019. He is not without influence at the new White House.

Could Netanyahu get the United States to apply even stronger sanctions against Iran now that Trump is back on top? Probably yes, and in that case the road would be open for the two of them to pursue their pipe-dream from last time: the ?Abraham Accords.'

That ?peace treaty', establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and some Arab countries that had never actually fought against it (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan) was touted as the defining diplomatic achievement of the first Trump presidency. In fact, it never amounted to much, because Saudi Arabia, the greatest power of the eastern Arab world, never joined.

Now, perhaps, with Iran so crippled, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia might be persuaded to make peace with

Israel and set up some sort of joint hegemony over the Middle East. Or such at least may be the visions now dancing before the eyes of Trump and Netanyahu. Even ?MbS' (as he is known) might be tempted.

More pipe-dreams, and even if they should come to pass, they wouldn't last long.

Netanyahu has been trying to write the Palestinians out of the story for his whole political life, and Trump may go along for the ride. But MbS doesn't dare let Israel expunge the Palestinians, neither does General Sisi in Egypt, and Iranians wouldn't hear of it even if the regime changes.

There is no viable plan, and peace is not nigh.