

What does Bibi want?

by GWYNNE DYER

'The war is over,' US Secretary of State Marco Rubio told Congress last Tuesday, but it isn't.

In the Persian Gulf there is a sort-of ceasefire between the United States and Iran that is reluctantly observed by Israel too, but there are air strikes between American and Iranian forces around the Gulf on most days.

There is also a nominal ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, but the reality is that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) is relentlessly grinding forward there every day. On an average day around a dozen Lebanese civilians are killed, and Israeli evacuation orders now cover about a fifth of the country (2,000 sq. km.)

While Donald Trump's objectives in launching the attack on Iran were unclear, his desperate desire to walk away from this failed 'little excursion' with something 'anything' that he could portray as a success is obvious. Once or twice a week he announces that a deal with Iran is imminent, but it never happens because the Iranians will get more if they wait.

The Israelis, by contrast, are quite happy to go on fighting. When Trump ordered Prime Minister Binyamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu to stop bombing Iran, he obeyed ('He'll do whatever I want him to do,' boasted Trump) because it had become clear that further attacks on Iran would accomplish nothing. But the Israeli invasion of Lebanon is a different matter.

Bibi did what he always does: he made a minor concession to placate Trump (he hasn't bombed the city of Beirut), but he hasn't stopped the IDF's steady advance into southern Lebanon. This led to some spectacular pyrotechnics by the American president on Monday, according to the US news website Axios (usually well informed on these matters).

'What the f*** are you doing?' Trump allegedly shouted in his call to Netanyahu. 'You're f***ing crazy. You'd be in prison if it weren't for me. I'm saving your ass. Everybody hates you now. Everybody hates Israel because of this.'

It certainly sounds like Trump 'especially the bit where he screams and shouts, but ultimately caves in to any dictator, any powerful leader whose strength he admires (Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, etc.). He is letting Netanyahu get away with it, even if it queers the deal with Iran, because he really can't help himself. Not all bullies are fakes, but Trump is.

But what does Netanyahu really want? The IDF is doing the same thing in southern Lebanon that it has already done in the Gaza Strip: empty the towns and villages with evacuation orders, then send in the engineers with explosives and bulldozers to demolish all the houses and other buildings. Leave nothing standing.

That task is more than half completed in the Strip. Netanyahu recently told the residents of Kfar Adumim, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank: 'We now control 60 percent of the [Gaza] territory.' Some in the crowd shouted '100 percent!' Netanyahu replied 'Go in order. First 70. Let's start with that.'

We know that the Israeli government's final goal is a Palestinian-free Gaza Strip because its members repeatedly tell us so. Just the day before Netanyahu's speech Defence Minister Israel Katz said that the goal was for large numbers of Palestinians to leave the Strip by what he called 'voluntary migration'.

'Voluntary' in the sense that many of the two million Palestinians squeezed into one-third of an already overcrowded territory, living in tents or makeshift shelters in sun and rain, summer and winter, drinking polluted water and feeding their families on very short rations, might ultimately despair and accept an offer of 'voluntary' migration.

That makes perfectly good sense if you are convinced that God gave all this land to your ancestors in perpetuity 3,800 years ago, but

it makes no sense to apply the same policy to southern Lebanon. It's clear that God did not give Lebanon to the Jews, and international law (what's left of it) doesn't approve of it either.

So what is Netanyahu up to? Israel occupied all this territory in 1982-2000, but finally chose to leave because of the constant drain of military casualties due to guerilla resistance (by the forerunners of the current Hezbollah organization). Does he think that it might work better this time if they systematically destroy all the houses and farms? Probably not.

It's more likely that he just wants to keep the war going until October, when he faces an election he might lose. Most Israelis want the wars against both Iran and Lebanon to continue, so that should win him some votes. But he does have a touch of the megalomaniacal about him, so you can't dismiss the notion that he really dreams of annexing southern Lebanon too.