

Will He? Won't He? Netanyahu Decides

by GWYNNE DYER

Will Binyamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, really launch a full-scale war against Lebanon-based Hezbollah when Israel is still fighting Hamas in Gaza? Of course he will.

Hamas is gravely weakened after losing at least 10,000 fighters killed in a year of fighting in the shattered streets of Gaza and the tunnels beneath them. But it would take at least twenty thousand Israeli soldiers to keep the remaining Hamas fighters in their holes.

So why would Netanyahu take on Hezbollah, which is a much more formidable enemy? It completely controls southern Lebanon, next to Israel's northern border, and it has at least 50,000 full-time fighters plus another 50,000 reserves. More importantly, it has 150,000-200,000 rockets, largely supplied by Iran.

Thousands of those rockets are precision-guided ballistic missiles with big explosive warheads that can reach anywhere in the country. Israel has good anti-missile defences, but they would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers if Hezbollah went all out.

Involving Israel in a full-scale war with Hezbollah and perhaps also with its Iranian sponsor sounds like a disaster in the making, but the Israeli prime minister is a slippery customer.

He successfully evaded the blame for being caught off-guard when Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis and kidnapped 250 others last October 7. Enough time has passed and enough Palestinians have been killed in Gaza that the Israeli public has now moved on.

But he also needs to keep the war going. That's why he promised President Biden to accept a ceasefire five times, and reneged on his word just as many times. (The last time was less than two weeks ago.) Biden simply can't get past his loyalty to the long-gone Israel of his youth, so although he loathes Bibi personally, Israel keeps getting all the weapons it wants.

But why does Netanyahu need to keep the war going, and why escalate it now?

Keeping the war going means that Netanyahu's coalition government doesn't collapse, and so long as he is a wartime prime minister the corruption trial that would probably send him to jail is suspended. Escalating now would mean a big war in the Middle East just when Americans are voting, which should favour Donald Trump, Netanyahu's friend and ally.

Moreover, there's always the possibility that a big war with Hezbollah would drag in Iran, which would then probably also pull in the United States, which would be Netanyahu's dearest wish come true.

However, Israel's northern front has been stable, if not quiet. Hezbollah was firing up to 150 short-range rockets and artillery shells into northern Israel every day and Israel has been doing the same thing back, but it was mostly for show. A lot of people fled or were evacuated on both sides, but not many were being killed.

Then, about ten days ago, Netanyahu started ramping it up. First the exploding pagers and walkie-talkies that killed, maimed or blinded several thousand Hezbollah operatives and some innocent bystanders, and saturation bombing and shelling of Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon and Beirut.

And finally, last Friday, the massive strike using 'bunker-buster' bombers on Hezbollah's underground headquarters in Beirut that killed Hasan Nasrallah, its leader for the past 32 years, and an unknown number of other senior Hezbollah officials.

This has all been meticulously planned, probably over six months or more. Victory would certainly seal Netanyahu's redemption and make him electorally fireproof - but the project to put an end to Hezbollah is still not assured of success.

The organisation has taken a terrible beating, and so many key people have been killed or put out of action that its response times will probably be slow. But I went in with the Israeli troops as a journalist the first time they invaded Lebanon in 1982, and it didn't even work very well that time.

There was little serious fighting at first, but as the occupation continued the resistance grew. Hezbollah was created, Israeli casualties mounted, and after eighteen years of ambushes and suicide bombings the Israelis pulled out.

The Israeli Defence Force invaded Lebanon again in 2006, and Hezbollah fought them to a standstill in 33 days. Despite the damage it has sustained recently, it is even better armed and trained today. Netanyahu should not count his chickens prematurely.