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As Netanyahu's Power in the Middle East Wanes, Trump Has to Find His Own Way to Deal with Iran

There is an extraordinary irony in the fate of both Benjamin Netanyahu and Iran. The first has been captaining the Titanic, in the words of one Israeli academic, through the past couple of days. The second – a rather better captain, it might be said – has been captaining a couple of tankers in and out of the Mediterranean and the Gulf.

The second was also the target of Netanyahu's Likud rhetoric at the United Nations. Remember the famous comic-cuts test tube cartoon which Netanyahu held before the UN, a symbol of the time it would take for the Islamic Republic to create a nuclear weapon? Iran must be “defanged”, I believe the words were; nuclear Islamist tyrant must be disarmed.

And there we were this week, with the Iranian beast actually firing at Saudi Arabia's oil plants – although I noted the Saudi claim that the attack was “unquestionably sponsored” (a big “sic” there) by Iran. In other words, it was the Houthis what done it but the Iranians who were behind it.

But the man who led the great anti-Iranian bash at the UN appears to have sank his ship, and the man who once told us all at the Herzeliya conference so many years ago that Beirut was “the centre of terror”, the then chief of staff Benny Gantz, may now be leading the state of Israel for the near future.

And the winner? Iran, of course.

It's strange how often this turns out to be the case. The Brits lost the tanker war when Iran's vessel turned up off the Syrian port of Banias. And what of Trump? Not much of a whizz-bang, was it, to tell the world that increased sanctions against Iran would be

unveiled “within 48 hours” – quite a while for Trump’s guys to fiddle their fingers – and that “there are many options”.

One option for Trump, now he knows Netanyahu’s fate, would be to turn on the Saudis, whose intelligence men chopped off poor Jamal Khashoggi’s head a year ago and did other unmentionable things to him before – let us speak frankly – disposing of him down a consulate drain, fountain or sink. Just what did the Saudi crown prince know about this abysmal, disgraceful affair? And let me add another question: was Khashoggi’s face turned towards Mecca when he was buried? Perhaps Mike Pompeo could actually ask Mohamed bin Salman, smiling broadly when he met him on Wednesday, what he knows about this gruesome killing of a very old friend of mine?

But that’s unkind. The Saudis are our allies – the Brits, remember, are still sponsoring them – and they tell us that the drone strikes by the Houthis/Iranians were “a test of global will”. And was our response to Khashoggi’s murder also a test of global will?

Not that I want to smooth Iran’s feathers, its hangings and tortures and injustices. But I was surprised, these hot few days in the Middle East, that no one – not Iran, not America, nor the Israelis – remembered that this week marked the 37th anniversary of the Sabra and Chatila massacre: an abhorrence created by Israel’s Christian militia allies in Lebanon, the slaughter of 1,700 mostly Palestinians in the refugee camps to which they were sent by an Israeli right-wing Likud minister in 1982. Yes, the same Likud party for which Netanyahu has probably just lost the Israeli election.

I am always struck by these anniversaries – how we forget them, how not a single president or prime minister or king came to the drab, tangled, overgrown cemetery where those men, women and children lie dead in West Beirut. I still recall their black countenances, the stench, the vileness of the mass graves over which I walked. Just a few days ago I passed by there in my taxi, and was deeply shocked to find that I had totally forgotten them too.

Back then, in 1982, Beirut was known as a “capital of terror”. A small army of suicide bombers had already, by 1983, unleashed themselves at the US embassy and the American Marines and the French paratroopers.

Directed by Iran? Inspired by Iran? That country with which the Americans and the Europeans and the Russians managed to achieve a nuclear agreement?

Heaven spare us from the enemies we turned into friends, and who are now enemies again – and from the ally who chopped off the head of one of my colleagues.

There are many options, the American president now tells us. Indeed there are.

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