

COMMENTARY

By Ibrahim Fraihat

Why is Netanyahu so desperate for a ceasefire with Hamas?

It was supposed to be a routine intelligence undercover operation whereby the Israeli agents would infiltrate into "enemy territory", carry out the mission, and leave without being detected. It had been done before, many times. In fact, over the past two years, Israel had been successful in carrying out two high-profile covert operations, assassinating Hamas drone expert Mohammed al-Zawari in Tunisia in December 2016 and engineer and scholar Fadi al-Batsh in Malaysia in April 2018.

But the Israeli intelligence operation on November 11 in Gaza did not go according to plan. Hamas intercepted it in its early stages, attacking the Israeli commandoes and pursuing them as they tried to flee the strip under the cover of heavy bombardment by Israeli jets. Seven Palestinians were killed in the botched operation, including a prominent al-Qassam Brigades commander, Nour Baraka, and one Israeli officer - an unnamed lieutenant colonel.

Hamas responded by firing hundreds of rockets into Israel, some intercepted by the Iron Dome, others landing in civilian areas, killing one Israeli civilian and injuring dozens of others. Its military wing went as far as targeting an Israeli military bus with a Kornet rocket, a Russian anti-tank guided missile; it was the first time it had used such weapons since the 2014 Gaza war.

The Israeli government also launched days-long air raids on Gaza, bombing civilian buildings and killing five Palestinians, but it could not repair the political damage that had been done.

Hamas was victorious. A video of the Kornet attack was widely circulated in Arab and Israeli media; Palestinians in Gaza started saying "the Kornet defeated the cabinet".

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had little space for manoeuvre: he was forced to settle for a ceasefire with Gaza armed groups, which prompted Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman to resign and plunged his government into a major political crisis.

This time, provoking a new conflict in Gaza in order to take attention away from the domestic political mess he has made is not an option for Netanyahu. He is cornered by a resurgent Hamas and his own geopolitical game in the Middle East, so he needs to keep Gaza quiet.

The Israeli government has insisted that the November 11 operation was not supposed to be an assassination mission, but has not provided further details. Analysts have argued that it was an intelligence gathering operation which was not meant to "trigger a new war". Regardless of what Netanyahu wanted to achieve, the only outcome of the botched operation was a win for Hamas. It not only proved the capabilities of its own intelligence - which managed to uncover the Israeli plot early on - but also demonstrated the weaknesses of the Israeli intelligence apparatus,



Palestinians burn a poster depicting Israel's Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman as they celebrate his resignation in Gaza City on November 14, 2018

- Suhaib Salem/Reuters

which, while able to carry out complex operations abroad, is ironically failing in neighbouring Gaza.

This was not the first time that an intelligence operation had gone terribly wrong under Netanyahu's watch. In 1997, he signed off on an assassination attempt against Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal, who at that time was residing in Jordan. After the two Israeli agents, who were supposed to inject him with poison, were caught and beaten up by Meshaal's bodyguard, a major diplomatic crisis erupted between Israel and Jordan, forcing the Israeli intelligence to hand in the antidote.

Although Netanyahu was cleared of any wrongdoing in a subsequent domestic investigation, the botched operation contributed to his massive defeat in the general elections two years later.

The assassination attempt in 1997 was a win for Hamas, and so was the November 11 failed operation. It has allowed the resistance movement to consolidate its political gains domestically and internationally and demonstrate its military strength.

It has also made evident the fact that Israel's decade-old blockade of Gaza has done little to weaken Hamas or the resolve of the Palestinian people to resist. Keeping two million people in "the biggest open-air prison" in the world for more than 10 years is not an effective "pacifying" tool.

With a stronger Hamas and a population determined to resist, another war in Gaza would be an even greater disaster for the Israeli government and Netanyahu is well-aware of that. Therefore, after a few days of air attacks on

the strip, he had to seek a ceasefire.

There was also another reason why the Israeli prime minister risked the collapse of his government to maintain calm with Gaza: Iran.

Netanyahu's top regional priority is countering Iran and its allies with whatever means possible. Keeping Gaza "conflict-free" allows him to curb Iranian influence in the strip and focus his attention on his larger project of confronting Iran in the rest of the Middle East.

The Israeli prime minister is seeking to solidify an anti-Iran front in the Middle East by establishing an alliance with the Arab Gulf states - mainly Saudi Arabia - and the United States and pursuing what has come to be known as "the ultimate deal".

This "deal" envisions forcing some form of territorial solution for the Palestinian issue onto the Palestinian leadership and full normalization of relations with Arab states, with the aim of isolating Iran even further in the region. Over the past few months, Netanyahu has upped the ante on normalization efforts, paying a visit last month to Oman, which traditionally had enjoyed good relations with Iran.

The latest Gaza ceasefire should be seen within this context. Over the past year, Egypt - under US patronage - has made extensive efforts to broker a long-term truce between Hamas and Israel as part of the "ultimate deal". Calming down the situation after the recent escalation was meant to salvage the progress Cairo had made in that direction.

Netanyahu is also eager to keep Gaza quiet because he is feeling increasingly

anxious about countering Iranian presence in Israel's immediate neighbourhood - Syria and Lebanon.

The downing of a Russian military plane over Syria in September complicated relations with Russia, which until then had allowed the Israeli Air Force to target Iranian facilities at will.

As a result, Russian-Israeli military coordination in Syria is no longer and while Israel still does occasional air attacks, Russia is no longer making it easy for its fighter jets.

The Israeli government is also increasingly wary of Iran's presence in Lebanon, which could strengthen the military capabilities of Hezbollah.

Although Israel scored another gain against Iran when the US re-imposed sanctions on Iranian oil earlier this month, it has also suffered a major setback in the aftermath of the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The uncertainty surrounding the fate of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman - seen as seriously committed to normalization with Israel - has worried Netanyahu. This has further motivated him to seek some form of a settlement with Hamas.

In this sense, Israel will continue to search for a long-term truce with Hamas as long as the project of confronting Iran remains on the table. For this reason, another full-fledged conflict in Gaza in the near future is unlikely.

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By Henry Newman

Here's what it would take to make May's Brexit deal work

The draft Brexit agreement will be rubber-stamped by a special European council meeting this weekend. But the current deal has little chance of making it through the Commons. Without parliamentary approval there is no path to a negotiated UK-EU agreement. Yet, so far, neither the UK nor EU has a proper plan B, other than a messy no deal. Time is running out to make changes to the deal to help it pass parliament.

A series of EU figures have been wheeled out to claim this deal is the final offer. They say they won't change anything. But if that's actually the case, there's a serious danger things will go wrong. Because I've heard from three former Conservative chief whips, all of whom argue that this deal will not now pass parliament. Even Labour Brexit-backers threaten to vote against it.

Of course, it's not going to be possible to tear up everything and start again. It's taken over a year and a half of snail-like negotiations to get here. And it's hard to see the EU offering Theresa May an agreement without a backstop at this stage, even if she demands they drop it. Equally, calls to accept the EU's supposed offer of a Canada-style trade deal miss the point that such an agreement is only on offer via a backstop.

However, the overarching goal of Michel Barnier and his team is a deal. This draft agreement is far from ideal for the UK. But it's also true that British negotiators won important concessions precisely because Brussels is keen to reach agreement. The EU climbed down on various points, from the size of our financial contribution, to governance of the withdrawal agreement, and from a UK-wide customs union, to the backstop itself. Although problematic and undesirable for the UK, the backstop is nonetheless an example of a bespoke relationship with neither free movement of people nor significant membership contributions - exactly what the EU pretended was not on offer.

When the prime minister meets EU leaders she should level with them and admit that the domestic reaction to the deal has been worse than she expected. At cabinet last week, her chief whip told ministers the DUP would abstain and predicted the deal would pass the Commons. That no longer seems plausible at this point, with dozens of Conservatives lined up to vote it down. So Theresa May should tell the assembled dignitaries that the deal is a dead duck, unless there can be limited but substantive changes to the withdrawal agreement and a significant development of the political declaration.

The political declaration, which was published alongside the draft withdrawal treaty, was almost painfully thin. Rather than giving confidence, it exacerbated concerns about the backstop by revealing that agreement about our future was so inchoate. Crucially, a revised text should set out a choice of future relationships: either a looser economic model closer to that of Canada's free trade agreement with technological solutions on the Irish border, or a more integrated agreement based on "deep" regulatory cooperation, as well as perhaps ultimately an even closer relationship designed to meet Labour's concerns. One line in the current draft helped trigger the resignation of former Brexit secretary Dominic Raab. The commitment that the "customs arrangements" will "build on the [backstop's] single customs territory" was added at the last minute. It should be removed, or explicitly refer to just the path towards a more integrated relationship.

Next the prime minister needs to agree three key changes to the divorce text - the withdrawal agreement. First, a "lock" for the Northern Ireland executive and assembly, the institutions of the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast agreement. Back in December, both the UK and EU agreed a joint report that said that there would be "no new regulatory barriers" between Northern Ireland and Great Britain unless the "executive and assembly agree ... distinct arrangements are appropriate". That lock should be reintroduced, to help address DUP concerns about the backstop.

Second, hidden within an annex is an article that some interpret as allowing the EU to levy tariffs on goods moving from the UK to Northern Ireland or the EU. All UK political parties have ruled out a customs border down the Irish Sea. So this article should be amended explicitly to prevent the EU unilaterally imposing such a customs border within the UK.

Third, the UK has been unable to secure a workable unilateral exit mechanism from the backstop, despite Raab's best efforts. This failure has exacerbated concerns that the UK could be "trapped" in the backstop. One way to break the impasse could be to state that the backstop does not create a permanent relationship, yet applies "as long as" the EU was working "to negotiate and conclude" a permanent agreement with the UK. This would be a fudge but would give both sides some surety. EU leaders will be loath to reopen the deal. But if they refuse they need to think carefully about the consequences. The drama of a potential leadership challenge, as well as Labour's desire to play political games, underscores the weakness of May's domestic political position. By the time the deal is rejected by parliament at its first vote, her space for manoeuvre may be even less. There's no point securing a deal that works perfectly in Brussels theory, but doesn't survive contact with Westminster politics - after all, that would be to repeat the mistakes of David Cameron's renegotiation.

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the Globalist

By James M. Dorsey

The Khashoggi murder

How Saudi Arabia is trying to extricate itself

To counter possible US pressure, the kingdom is exploring opportunities to diversify its arms suppliers and build a domestic defence industry. It is also rallying the wagons at home with financial handouts and new development projects in a bid to bolster domestic support for crown prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The Democrats' election victory has strengthened Saudi concerns that the Trump administration may pressure the kingdom to back down on key issues like the Yemen war.

That conflict has sparked the world's worst humanitarian crisis since World War Two and the 17-month old Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar.

US officials have argued that Saudi policies complicate their efforts to isolate and economically cripple Iran.

The officials assert that the boycott of Qatar and the fallout of the October 2 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul constitute obstacles to the creation of a Sunni Muslim alliance against the Islamic republic, dubbed an Arab NATO.

Going a step further, senior Israelis say they have given up on the notion of a Sunni Muslim alliance whose interests would be aligned with those of the Jewish state and see their budding relations with Gulf states increasingly in transactional terms. In apparent recognition that the Saudi military, reliant on US

and European arms acquisitions, would find it difficult to quickly shift to Russian or Chinese systems, Saudi Arabia appears for now to be focusing on alternative Western suppliers.

That could prove to be risky with anti-Saudi sentiment because of the Yemen war also running high in European parliaments. Countries like Spain and Germany are either teetering on the brink of sanctions or have toyed with restrictions on weapons sales to the kingdom.

With the sale of the US-made precision-guided munitions bogged down in Congress, Spain has stepped in to address Saudi Arabia's immediate need. The question is however whether Spain can fully meet Saudi demand.

A US refusal already before the Gulf crisis and the Khashoggi incident to share with Saudi Arabia its most advanced drone technology, paved the way for Chinese agreement to open its first overseas defence production facility in the kingdom.

State-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) will manufacture its CH-4 Caihong, or Rainbow drone, as well as associated equipment in Saudi Arabia. The CH-4 is comparable to the US armed MQ-9 Reaper drone.

Saudi Arabia also fears that Democratic control of the House could strengthen opposition to a nuclear energy agreement with the kingdom. Five Republi-

can senators called on President Donald J. Trump days before the mid-term election to suspend talks with Saudi Arabia.

Development of a defence industry would over time serve Prince Mohammed's efforts to diversify the Saudi economy and create jobs.

So would King Salman's inauguration this week of 259 development projects worth US\$ 6.13 billion ranging from tourism, electricity, environment, water, agriculture, housing and transport to energy. King Salman launched the projects during a curtailed visit to Saudi provinces designed to bolster support for his regime as well as his son, Prince Mohammed.

On the other hand, the government's most recent decision to restore annual bonuses and allowances for civil servants and military personnel without linking them to performance constitutes an attempt to curry public favour.

Of course, this move runs contrary to Prince Mohammed's intention to streamline the Saudi bureaucracy and stimulate competition. (Bonuses were cut in 2016 as part of austerity measures. They were restored last year and linked in May to job performance).

In a further populist move, King Salman also pardoned prisoners serving time on financial charges and promised to pay the debts up to \$267,000 of each one of them. All in all, King Salman's moves appear designed to lessen Saudi

dependence on US arms sales and project a united front against any attempt to implicate Prince Mohammed in the death of Khashoggi.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan insists that the order to kill the journalist came "from the highest levels of the Saudi government." And, following the CIA's most recent assessment about the Crown Prince's involvement in the Khashoggi murder, Donald Trump is under new pressure.

Few in Washington are satisfied with the announced Saudi action against the perpetrators, sensing a whitewash of sorts with regard to those really responsible for the murder.

Failure to be seen to be taking credible action may not undermine King Salman's rallying of the wagons at home. But it will do little to weaken calls in Washington as well as European capitals for tougher action in a bid to force Saudi Arabia to come clean on the Khashoggi case.

One particular pressure point is to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards ending the Yemen war and resolving the Gulf crisis.

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