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How Netanyahu outwitted Biden

di Edward Luce

The US president had hoped to disentangle from the Middle East, but Israel's leader has 'run rings around him'. The turbulence in the region now threatens to tip the election and define Biden's legacy.

After Bill Clinton's first meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, he turned to an aide and said: "Who is the fucking superpower here?" Four US presidents later, nobody would think of posing that question about Israel's pugilistic prime minister. Netanyahu long ago established what military analysts call "escalation dominance" over whoever sits in the Oval Office — none more so than Joe Biden.

No president more than Biden has wanted to disentangle from the Middle East. Yet none, in the wake of Israel's latest ground incursion into Lebanon and the spectre of a full-blown war with Iran, is likelier to be defined by the region than him.

"Netanyahu knows how to play the Washington game better than most US politicians," says Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli diplomat, now columnist for the Haaretz newspaper. "And he has been running rings around Biden."

Even by Netanyahu's standards, however, the current situation has a House of Cards quality to it. With just a month to go before the US presidential election, what happens in the Middle East could change the outcome on November 5.

On Tuesday Iran fired 180 ballistic missiles at Israel in retaliation for the Israel Defense Forces' killing of Hassan Nasrallah, head of Lebanese militant group Hizbollah, Iran's largest proxy ally in the region.

Though no Israeli was killed, a number of Iranian rockets made it through Israel's famed Iron Dome missile defence system. One landed close to an F-35 air base in the Negev desert; another narrowly missed the headquarters of the Israeli spy agency Mossad in Tel Aviv.

In contrast to Israel's last exchange of salvos with Iran in April, this time Biden officials did not publicly urge restraint on Netanyahu. This is in spite of the fact that an escalation between Iran and Israel could lead to spiralling oil prices, which would instantly depress US consumer sentiment just as voters are going to the polls.

On Thursday, Biden admitted he was in discussion with Netanyahu about an Israeli strike on Iran's oilfields. Iran has in the past signalled that it would retaliate to any such strike with attacks on oil infrastructure in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The Brent price of oil has already

risen from \$70 a barrel on Monday to \$78 by yesterday. A new round of strikes could send it hurtling towards \$100.

Asked about such a prospect, all Biden could do was interrupt himself. “I think that would be a little . . . anyway,” he replied. What Biden may have stopped himself from adding is that such an escalation could badly damage Kamala Harris’s chances of beating Donald Trump next month.

Yet it is Netanyahu, not Biden, who will decide what happens next. Recent history shows that Israel’s prime minister is unlikely to pay heed to whatever restraint Biden is urging on him in private.

“Netanyahu is riding high,” says Marwan al-Muasher, Jordan’s former foreign minister, now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “He won’t want to do anything to help Harris’s election prospects.”

On Monday, Israel will commemorate the first anniversary of the slaughter of 1,200 Israelis by Hamas terrorists. In the wake of that massacre, Netanyahu’s political prospects were all but written off. Israeli intelligence’s failure to pick up the warning signs of a planned Hamas operation and Netanyahu’s diversion of IDF forces from Gaza to the West Bank amounted to Israel’s biggest strategic blunder since Egypt’s Yom Kippur attack on Israel in 1973.

Yet somehow Netanyahu — the Houdini of Israeli politics — has managed to survive and even prosper. The latest Israeli polls show that his Likud party would be the largest if a snap election were held now. A large majority of Israelis are opposed to a two-state solution with Palestinians, which Biden has insisted must be Israel’s end goal. Netanyahu has consistently refused to specify the “day after” political settlement for the Gaza war that Biden has been urging on him.

“We thought Netanyahu had used up his nine lives,” says Paul Salem, vicepresident at the Washington-based Middle East Institute, speaking from Lebanon. “It turns out he had several more lives in his back pocket.”

Biden is not the only US figure that Netanyahu has outwitted. In March, Chuck Schumer, the Democratic Senate majority leader, and the most senior elected Jewish-American in US history, called for fresh Israeli elections and new leadership. “Prime Minister Netanyahu has lost his way by allowing his political survival to take precedence over the best interests of Israel,” Schumer said in a speech on the Senate floor.

Two weeks later, Israel widened the war by striking an Iranian diplomatic complex in Damascus, killing 16 people including several senior commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. That led to the first round of direct salvos between Iran and Israel. It also marked the start of Netanyahu’s political revival. In July, Netanyahu gave an address to the joint houses of Congress in Washington. He received 52 standing ovations. Schumer was among those applauding.

But nothing has done more to boost Netanyahu's latest resurrection than his pivot from Gaza to Lebanon over the past month. Mossad's success in detonating thousands of Hizbollah handheld pagers and walkie-talkies changed the narrative.

Though the operation claimed many Lebanese lives — as have Israeli air strikes on Beirut over the past fortnight — its technical virtuosity restored pride to the badly damaged morale of Israel's intelligence agencies.

Yet again, Netanyahu also wrongfooted the Biden administration. On countless occasions over the past year, Netanyahu has appeared to agree to one thing with Washington and done the opposite in practice. Whether it is wranglings over the terms of a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release, or the more recent attempt at a 21-day ceasefire with Hizbollah, each time Biden is left looking impotent. "The Biden administration seems to be saying, 'We're suffering from a bit of autumn damp'," says Pinkas. "No, this isn't seasonal damp, it's Netanyahu urinating all over you."

What happens in the coming days could be fateful for the future of both the Middle East and US politics. At some point Israel will strike back at Iran. The question is whether the Israeli retaliation will qualify as an "escalate to de-escalate" move — as Israel characterised its assault on Hizbollah — or if it will be a full-blown escalation that could trigger a spiralling conflict with Iran.

The chances of an Israeli attempt to topple the Iranian regime cannot be fully discounted. Netanyahu earlier this week sent a message to what he called the "Persian" people in which he said: "When Iran is finally free and — that moment will come a lot sooner than people think — everything will be different. Our two ancient peoples, the Jewish people and the Persian people, will finally be at peace."

But even a more modest Israeli action would entail risks. Jeffrey Feltman, a former regional envoy for Biden, and who led the US State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs in Barack Obama's administration, says that everything points to further Netanyahu surprises in the coming weeks. "All the indicators are aligning — Israel's tactical and strategic objectives, Israeli public opinion and Netanyahu's political survival," says Feltman.

Tactically, Israel's strikes on Hizbollah and incursion into southern Lebanon showed the Israeli public that Netanyahu was taking action to enable the roughly 60,000 displaced Israelis to return to their homes in northern Israel.

Strategically, Israel's operations are rebalancing forces in the wider region by decimating Hizbollah's leadership and putting Iran on the back foot. This new phase in the post-October 7 war is wildly popular with Israeli public opinion.

Finally, the direction of events is saving Netanyahu's political skin. While he remains prime minister, Netanyahu can avoid a series of criminal charges that are in abeyance. "This is Netanyahu's get-out-of-jail-free card," says Feltman.

Among Democrats in Washington, there is rising anguish about Biden's failure to rein in Netanyahu and what this could mean for Harris's campaign.

He came to office promising to disentangle America from quagmires in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Like Obama, whose second term ended up being consumed by the war against Isis, he had hoped that his administration would be defined by the pivot to the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific. Biden now risks leaving office with the Middle East on fire and US forces beefed up in the region with 40,000 US troops stationed there, as well as two aircraft carriers. The Middle East could also jeopardise his entire legacy by opening the door to a return of Trump. Yet it is hard to find anyone who believes that Biden will change his act now. "Nobody can satisfactorily explain to me why Biden has been so passive," says al-Muasher.

In addition to helping Israel eliminate Hamas, Biden had two aims after October 7. The first was to ensure a day-after plan for the governance of Gaza that would pave the way for a two-state solution. The second was to stop a widening of the war to the region.

The first is all but dead. It is not just Israeli public opinion but the Palestinians as well who have lost faith in the idea of an independent state alongside Israel. The second goal is on the brink of failure, too. And if the turbulence of the last month extends until the election, the chances that Biden's presidency ends in failure will also rise.