[**The doppelgangers of mayhem**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1624226/the-doppelgangers-of-mayhem)

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THERE are striking similarities between Benjamin Netanyahu and Narendra Modi, not the least their cynical methods of staying in power. But there are differences too. One rose, self-confessedly, from a humble tea vendor at the railway station, the other was a military commando before becoming a right-wing demagogue. The unlikely doppelgangers thrive on dividing people, polarising them along religious or ethnic lines even as they manipulate political outcomes to their advantage. They don’t always succeed, of course, but this is the one method they know.

Consider the current flare-up in the violence between Hamas and the Israeli military. It reads like a chapter from Balakot or Muzaffarnagar together with a campaign thrown in to ‘reclaim’ a Jewish temple from the site of a Muslim mosque.

In its bare form, the Hamas-Israel violence is in fact taking place in Netanyahu’s interest if not also at his bidding. Following inconclusive elections in March, the Israeli prime minister needed to remove the prospect of conviction over corruption charges. He couldn’t muster a majority and President Reuven Rivlin, a Likud colleague but hostile to Netanyahu, has given up to June to his rivals to stitch up a viable government. The coalition can work but it needs the help of an Arab group who Netanyahu had wooed in the past. This time around he needs to subvert the prospects of a possible alliance of leftists, rightists and Arabs, not least because it would be ranged against him.

Modi like Netanyahu has sown mistrust between communities for political profit.

Driving a wedge between Israeli Arabs (they don’t like to call them Palestinians) and Jewish parties would accomplish the required outcome. The needless police assault on Muslim worshippers at Al Aqsa mosque together with a stepped-up drive to evict Arab residents from their abodes in East Jerusalem has led to history repeating itself. Violence has broken out not only between Palestinians in Gaza and West Bank on the one side and Israeli troops on the other, but Arab and Jewish residents of Israeli cities who have lived in relative peace for years have turned on each other, not completely but sufficiently to spoil the optics for a rapprochement between communities now seen as mutually hostile. It has shades of the Modi formula, so much so it cannot be ruled out that someone has been exchanging notes on their behalf.

There has been more bad news for Netanyahu. Like his kindred spirit in New Delhi, Netanyahu had sought to put a spin on his mishandling of the pandemic. Modi lost a string of key elections at least partly due to the skyrocketing body count while the one significant election he won in Assam was with the help of local tribal chiefs and Congress party turncoats. Israeli media have cited polls suggesting that if an election were held now, Netanyahu’s Likud party would lose more than a quarter of the seats it took in March. Many would go to another right-wing party led by Naftali Bennett, his former aide. Will the visual pummelling of Hamas improve Netanyahu’s ratings?

In a small victory for Netanyahu, as a consequence of the politically induced Arab-Jewish violence, Bennett has had to row back from eyeing a government with Ra’am (United Arab List) head Mansour Abbas. He has informed fellow opposition leader Yair Lapid the idea was off the table. Lapid had been asked by the president to attempt to form the government. The problems have not abated for Netanyahu.

He still needs a way to win reprieve from conviction and possibly imprisonment.

Speculation is rife that he might throw himself in the fray as a presidential candidate in elections due on June 2. The indirect election through the Knesset could produce the needed immunity, but will he have the numbers in what is traditionally a secret ballot? There’s a possibility that he may back a candidate who would give him immunity. So it all seems to be about Netanyahu fighting conviction. But it has had an effect on the larger political architecture concerning the Middle East. It has forced President Joe Biden to take his eyes off China and potentially get sucked back into a place where his political options do not necessarily blend with his Russia-specific agenda in Europe and his promise to revive the anti-China pivot to the east. With the former Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati calling his Hamas counterpart to extend support against Israel — “the spider in its web” — the apertures have opened wider.

Right now, Netanyahu is fighting to prove his credentials as a pugnacious leader who could not be trifled with. When needed he could even go for a showdown with Barack Obama, remember? Will he win the battle with Hamas and at what cost? Israeli opponents have been warning of civil war-like conditions in strife-torn Israeli cities. As for Israel’s military superiority, everyone knows that it has a humungous capability to pound at will Hamas bases in Gaza. But not everyone knew that Israel’s so-called iron dome of anti-missile protection, supposed to give the country its much-touted invincibility from incoming projectiles could be so easily breached. How this may impact Israel’s status as an international vendor of fail-proof weaponry will be decided when the time comes, but, for now it has to be seen how much if any political mileage Netanyahu has extracted by stirring up fresh confrontation with Hamas.

Netanyahu has many advantages like Modi. They are both aided and abetted in their pursuit of power by an assiduously loyal and influential media. But as recent elections in crucial Indians states showed, the ground reality is not always amenable to media manipulation.

Modi like Netanyahu has sown mistrust between communities for political profit. But how long can mayhem pass for politics, particularly when people are choking to death without any succour in sight? However, both leaders have a great asset in common here, which challenges easy speculation about their political demise — a notoriously divided opposition.

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*Published in Dawn, May 18th, 2021*