Israel must keep its war machine running during the ceasefire

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 23.11.2023

The decision of the Israeli government to approve the hostage deal is akin to a choice between two terrible options. From Hamas' perspective, the internal discord in Israel during the run-up to that decision was not just a welcome development; it was a goal in and of itself.

Psychological warfare and efforts to influence the Israeli mindset are part and parcel of Hamas' modus operandi, not only in acts of terror and warfare but also in negotiations. Creating rifts and fostering division within Israeli society weaken it on the battlefield. Those who opposed the deal initially eventually succumbed to the majority's position for the sake of social cohesion. We should adopt the unity approach in the future in the face of Hamas' manipulation and as we grapple with the numerous challenges that lie ahead until a final decision is reached.

One should not bury their head in the sand

However, it is crucial not to underestimate or downplay the prices and risks arising from the ceasefire deal. A positive and clear presentation of these challenges is necessary if we are to properly prepare for them and be able to deal with the difficulties they pose.

Undoubtedly, Hamas would like to see the ceasefire as a turning point in the conflict. It believes the halting of the fire will result in the IDF losing momentum and that it would gradually scale back its operations through a series of limited ceasefires and restrictive conditions until a complete halt to hostilities is achieved. Simultaneously, Israel would lose legitimacy for high-intensity warfare, the international community would increase its diplomatic effort to strike a broader political arrangement, and in the meantime, Hamas would recover.

In the optimal scenario envisioned by Hamas, the top military leadership and most of the organization's military strength remain unscathed. The political leadership, based in Qatar and other countries, also retains its position. Hamas continues to be the main power in the region, dictating the agenda, and Israel is forced to release its security prisoners and accept limitations on its activities as

part of an exchange deal. The final piece of the puzzle is an agreement for an international process to rehabilitate the Gaza Strip.

Such a scenario is entirely contrary to Israel's desired outcome and is unacceptable. While the IDF and the Shin Bet actions have produced great results so far on the battlefield – which also projects formidable strength to deter enemies on other fronts – achieving the over-arching goals of the war is still a long way off. The ceasefire that has been agreed to as part of the hostage deal will pose numerous operational challenges for Israel.

The biggest challenge is how to ensure the IDF can resume its fire rather than fall into the Hamas honeytrap. The IDF must maintain its war posture, in accordance with the civilian echelon's stated intention to continue the fight. During the ceasefire, it must carry out moves in anticipation of the next stages of the war, such as distributing leaflets and evacuation notices to areas where renewed hostilities are expected. It is also time to complete the establishment of a broad security perimeter along the entire border and consolidate the IDF's control of the border to accommodate the new reality that will transpire once the war is over. Simultaneously, and in accordance with the overall political goals, the defense establishment must act against senior Hamas figures and networks outside the Gaza Strip in areas that are not covered by the ceasefire agreements.

Another challenge facing security officials is denying Hamas the opportunity to rearm and stockpile under the guise of the ceasefire. Hamas will try to do that by means of smuggling weapons and other objects from Egypt, as well as through the diversion of humanitarian aid entering the strip. A strict Israeli approach is warranted in this regard, with no reason for Israeli generosity in humanitarian assistance when it is clear that at least some of it will benefit Hamas.

In parallel with the military efforts in Gaza, the IDF must continue its determined struggle against terrorist organizations in the West Bank. The planned attack by a Hamas cell from Hebron that was thwarted this week near Bethlehem indicates that there is high motivation and that there are quite a lot of ideas currently brewing among the top terrorists in the West Bank. Gaza provides them with motivation and inspiration. Only if Israel acts with resolve and with a proactive offensive posture, as demonstrated by the security agencies in recent months, can it successfully curtail this activity.

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