

A multi-theater reality has emerged; Israel faces a test

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 19.04.2024

As Passover 2024 approaches, Israel confronts a daunting array of security and political challenges that will shape its standing and threat landscape for years to come. Overcoming these trials will be an immense test due to several compounding factors - the sheer number of threats, their geographic spread, the intricate connections between them, the grave consequences of missteps, and the lack of consensus on prioritization amidst urgent timelines.

Adding complexity, for the first time Israel must navigate this perilous environment while grappling with the plight of 133 captives held in Gaza and thousands displaced from the north. Withstanding this pivotal moment requires societal resilience mirroring the national unity after the October 7 attacks, coupled with robust military capabilities and deft statecraft.

The sweeping objectives Israel must secure across multiple fronts underscore the magnitude of the challenge:

Iran

Iran's nuclear ambitions, long the paramount security imperative, take on heightened urgency after its brazen strike against Israel. Neutralizing Iran's missiles, proliferation networks, and proxy forces is equally vital. With the nightmarish scenario of an atomic Iran inching toward reality, Israel aims to capitalize on this window to spur decisive American leadership against the Iranian regime's nefarious pursuits, while preparing contingencies should that falter.

Syria

Syria: Israel must continue its operations to thwart Iran's entrenchment in this arena, and not allow any change to the rules of the game that it has dictated until now.

Lebanon and Hezbollah

It is proper to set a target date for the return of residents of the northern

communities to their homes, while physically distancing Hezbollah's Radwan forces outside of the threat range, and until then - to continue the active defense strategy, strike at commanders and capabilities, and maintain freedom of operation in this arena.

The Gaza Strip

Israel needs to achieve the three ultimate objectives it defined for the war, which have not yet been accomplished: the release of the captives, the toppling of Hamas' governance, and the dismantling of its military capabilities. A significant increase in pressure will serve all three. Beyond action in Rafah, which should also include the border crossing area and the Philadelphi Route, Israel must crush the committees and mechanisms that Hamas utilizes within the territory, and systematically eliminate Hamas' leaders abroad.

Regarding the "day after" issue - as long as Hamas remains the central power in the Strip, any attempt to establish an alternative in its place, without its consent, is bound to fail. This reality will only change if Hamas is defeated, which is what should be focused on at this stage.

The West Bank and Palestinian Authority

Israel's first objective is to prevent attacks and demolish terrorist networks, of any kind and from any element. It is proper to maintain the offensive approach displayed by the security establishment in this arena since October 7 and improve readiness for scenarios that could develop inspired by Hamas' attacks. In a long-term view, the lessons of the reality that developed in Gaza should inform us as we counter any pressure or temptation to upgrade the Palestinian Authority's status or limit Israel's freedom of operation in this arena.

Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom understood the potential Iranian threat against it even before the attack from Tehran. The possible threat from the "Axis of Resistance" on the border between Israel and Jordan requires both sides to adopt an appropriate response while capitalizing on the advantages of security coordination.

The regional arena

The success of the coalition of states in halting the Iranian attack presents an opportunity to consolidate and expand the partnership. The fact that the peace agreements continue to stand firm despite the war fosters optimism regarding the ability to broaden and deepen cooperation.

Saudi Arabia

Establishing relations with the kingdom will continue to be an important goal for Israel, but it is doubtful whether this can be achieved in the time remaining until the US elections. It is proper to continue down this path but not at the expense of pursuing the defeat of Hamas.

Sudan

Its rapprochement with Iran should worry Israel - especially given its past when it served as a transit point for arms smuggling to the Gaza Strip at the behest of Iran. Israel and the US can also curb this trend now.

Above all else, topping the list of Israel's foreign policy objectives is cementing and strengthening relations with the US. President Joe Biden has again proved his commitment to Israel's security, despite the disagreements and tensions. Beyond the appreciation he deserves for this, it is proper to confine the disputes to substantive issues and lower their public profile.

Published in Israel Hayom, April 20, 2024.