Decisive Hamas victory will impact Hezbollah as well

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 21.06.2024

In the complex web of dilemmas facing Israeli decision-makers, the war to decisively defeat the Hamas terror organization must remain a cornerstone of policy and action. After Oct. 7, there is no room for maneuver – any other outcome will have far-reaching consequences. A determined effort to achieve all our objectives in the Gaza Strip will also shake Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's confidence in the effectiveness of his attrition strategy against Israel and provide him and Lebanese leaders with a stark illustration of the potential outcomes of a war with Israel.

The dispute at the top political-security echelon on Gaza-related issues reflects not only differences in approaches to the strategic purpose (real, not declared) of the war but also gaps in assessing the effectiveness of efforts and the synchronization of the Gaza fighting with other threats and challenges. Our enemies exploit this disagreement as propaganda material, presenting it as expressions of frustration and despair, and as signs of breakdown within the Israeli system.

Examining the conduct of the Israeli military and society, along with the war's achievements, provides a mixed balance that leans more toward the positive, optimistic side than the opposing view.

This refers not only to military achievements but even to the war's impact on public opinion in Gaza, as can be learned from the results of an updated quarterly survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research headed by Khalil Shikaki. This survey indicated a decrease in the percentage of Gaza residents who still support Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, a decrease in satisfaction with Hamas, and a decline in the percentage of Gazans who believe Hamas will win the war. While the data is still far from indicating a complete shift (and in the West Bank, they even reflect a trend of strengthening for Hamas), they should not be ignored.

The differences in approaches within the Israeli system are not always reconcilable, but it is possible to reduce expectation gaps between the political

echelon and the security system, and between both of these and the public.

The first gap concerns the required achievement. The goal defined by politicians is the destruction of Hamas' military and governmental capabilities, but there is still a need to define metrics by which its achievement can be assessed. Security officials have often used the term "dismantling," referring to dismantling the ability of Hamas brigades and battalions to operate as organized frameworks. Indeed, the IDF has dismantled most of them.

In a war against a regular state army, collapsing the combat system, dismantling it, and certain destruction of its forces is sufficient to make its fighting hopeless in a way that will lead to deterrence and surrender. This happened in our wars against Arab armies until 1973.

In the case before us, fighting against a hybrid entity – an army that knows how to switch to operate as guerrilla and terror cells (or against another jihadist army, like the Nazis and Japanese) – is not enough to defeat it. Dismantling the system is necessary to achieve the second decisive factor: eliminating the enemy and/or uprooting it from the area. This can explain the return to places where the IDF has already operated in the past and the lengthy time required.

Another gap exists regarding the destruction of governmental capabilities. While one approach suggests that the way to revoke Hamas' control is to allow another entity (not the IDF) to take over civilian affairs management in Gaza, the other opinion holds that no entity other than the IDF can succeed under current conditions, and in any case, every Hamas governmental power center must be collapsed, even if there is temporarily no alternative. Either way, there is no known plan to achieve the goal, including severing Hamas' control of humanitarian aid that provides it with breathing room and positions of power.

An additional gap is related to the pace and intensity of the fighting. These are influenced by the constraints Israel faces – political, operational, and legal. However, the current approach reduces efficiency, limits pressure points on the enemy, allows its forces to escape to areas outside the combat zone and reorganize there, prolongs the war, and strengthens the sense of stagnation. A strategy of accumulating tactical achievements comes with high prices that can only be demanded from the public when there is no other alternative.

The political and security leadership would do well to clarify these issues within

the discussion rooms. Despite its drawbacks, the dispute can be an opportunity to strengthen our confidence not only in the justness of the war but also in the way it is being conducted.

Targeting Hamas leaders will clarify that there is a price for their refusal
Unlike in these areas, there seems to be no dispute about the importance of eliminating Hamas leadership and the expected benefits in relation to all the goals Israel has defined. While the difficulty in doing so regarding commanders in Gaza can be understood, it is not understandable regarding the organization's leaders abroad, who star in the media and behave as if their immunity is guaranteed.

The central role played by this command, and its efforts to drag Israel into a multi-front war, require Israel to take systematic action against it until all its components are neutralized – especially after the Oct. 7 onslaught and after the clear wording provided by Khaled Mashal regarding Hamas' commitment to destroy Israel.

Targeting them will clarify that there is a price for their refusal of a release deal and for the passing time. It will help disrupt the ability to control and coordinate and make recovery efforts more difficult.

Without an effective command abroad, Hamas will lose its status as a movement with regional influence, even if it continues to exist as a local persecuted organization. This is a shared interest for Israel and its neighbors, and a goal that serves the American desire to shape a new regional order.

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