Hamas must be dethroned

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 05.01.2024

Three months into the war in Gaza, Israel's achievements are admirable, but if it were to attain its goals, it will have to make additional efforts, which will stretch for a protracted period.

The political-security leadership in Israel faces a series of challenges and dilemmas regarding future moves. In order to decide correctly, one only has to watch non-stop reels of the horrific footage from October 7 and remember that this is an unavoidable war that was imposed on Israel and began under extremely difficult initial conditions, and for that very reason, Israel must end it with a resounding victory. In order to achieve the goals that have been set, the State of Israel and the IDF have to meet three challenges.

Dealing with the tunnel network

Israel cannot allow Hamas' monstrous tunnel network to stay in place in the Gaza Strip. However, uncovering this network and destroying it will come at a heavy price. Continuing the effort to systematically deal with the tunnels will prolong the fighting, will tax our forces, and also increase political pressure on Israel. In order not to get corralled into tight timetables and to deflect pressure on this issue to the other side, Israel must make it clear that as long as there are tunnels, the state of warfare will continue. An area with tunnels will be defined as a "combat zone", and anyone in it will be considered an enemy and dealt with accordingly, regardless of the physical presence of ground forces in those areas (for example by air strike). This policy must be in effect indefinitely, so long as there are tunnels.

This means that Gaza City residents and northern Gaza residents will not be able to return so long as there are tunnels under their homes. Eradicating tunnels will be beneficial on its own merits, but it will presumably also increase the public's pressure and outrage toward Hamas.

Rafah and the Philadelphi Route

If the past is prologue, then it is clear that arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip cannot be prevented without effective control over the Philadelphi Route and the

border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. Supervision mechanisms and reliance on other arrangements in this area have always turned out to be a resounding failure. As long as there is a free flow of weaponry from Sinai to the Gaza Strip, it will not be possible to ensure the security demilitarization of the strip – and the efforts invested by the IDF and the Shin Bet in locating and destroying the weapons within the strip will have been largely in vain.

An effective buffer between Gaza and Egypt will serve not only Israel's security needs but will also contribute to Egypt's national security interest – it will prevent Hamas terrorists in Gaza from reaching Egyptian territory. The Muslim Brotherhood, after all, is a bitter foe of the regime in Egypt, and Hamas is the strongest armed group in that movement. Moreover, Egypt's interest is to prevent Hamas from even reaching the Sinai. The links between Hamas elements in Gaza and global jihad elements in the peninsula have made the threat to Egyptian forces that much greater.

Even if we assume that understandings could be struck between Israel and Egypt on this issue, a response will be required to two operational challenges: How to operate militarily in the crowded area that has absorbed thousands of people evacuated from the northern Gaza Strip; and the method by which it will be possible to safely defend the narrow border strip over a protracted period. The security establishment has vivid memories of the attacks on the Philadelphi Route from 2005 (when Israel pulled out of the Gaza Strip) and has therefore incorporated the lessons learned from that period into its current thinking

Minimizing damage from civilian assistance

Much has been said about the price Israel has paid for bringing humanitarian aid into the strip. Even if this is an essential condition for US support and assistance, Israel still has the means to make sure that Hamas will not enjoy the huge benefits of such aid.

First, it is still not too late to define within the enclave a "de-escalation" zone to which humanitarian assistance will exclusively be delivered and handed out. Israel would let anyone interested in bringing such aid to this area do so and invite Gazans to come and benefit from it, so long as this is within the perimeter of that area.

Second, there is no reason why Hamas should be allowed to continue controlling

the distribution of aid. This allows it to maintain its power over the area and govern. Israel should take out any Hamas policeman or other affiliated member sent by the organization who engages in such action. To topple Hamas' rule we must prevent it from having a grip on the distribution and the other resources that only help it cement its status as the governing authority of the Gaza Strip. Israel should not be deterred by the prospect that this would result in chaos. This is the only way that will lead to a real (not superficial) collapse of the regime in Gaza.

A new reality in the strip

Victory over Hamas requires creating a reality in the strip that will not allow the resurgence of terrorist elements. Security officials have rightly stated that such a fundamental change requires Israel to act with resolve and over a long period – i.e., without standing with a stopwatch in hand. If Hamas maintains a strong and armed core, it will continue to be the main player in the Gaza Strip of 2024, regardless of who officially manages its civilian affairs.

Israel's takeover of the entire area – by keeping the northern part of the strip and Gaza City off limits to residents; confiscating humanitarian aid from Hamas; and hitting Hamas' police and other affiliated entities that allow it to maintain de facto control of the strip – will give Israel the necessary leverage to also secure the release of the captives. As long as Hamas is not convinced that Israel is determined to eliminate its presence in Gaza, it will continue to show intransigence on hostages.

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