Don’t squander Israel’s sacrifice

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 08.01.2024

Alongside the reports on initial discussions in the Diplomatic-Security Cabinet regarding the post-war situation in Gaza, it is highly advisable to downgrade expectations: there are no good options in Gaza. Had there been any, they would already have been implemented, on one of the many opportunities throughout the long history of this conflict.

When it comes to formulating the official positions regarding the ‘day after’, the policymakers will have to adopt a realistic approach, to adhere to the data and the hard facts regarding the monstrous entity sitting on the other side of the Gaza Strip border, which has dug its claws deep into all aspects of life and layers of the population, and they must assume that is not readily possible to generate any profound cultural change – at least in this generation.

With an extremely high percentage of support for Hamas, as long as a strong, organized, and armed core of the terrorist organization manages to remain in the Gaza Strip, it will clearly continue to be the dominant power in the Gaza Strip, whatever the identity and definition of the entity that is officially charged with running civil affairs there. Therefore, it is imperative to conclude this war with a decisive victory and on terms that will prevent the terrorist organization’s renewed growth.

In any event, we must stipulate the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip and Israel’s freedom of action there as a basic underlying condition for any future state of affairs to be established in Gaza. It is important to be wary of and avoid any initiative or move that might jeopardize this, to be extremely cautious of a puppet government that will simply become a tool to be exploited by Hamas (such as Hezbollah in Lebanon), nor should we place our trust in any foreign supervisory mechanisms.

As far as Israel is concerned, the question of the “day after” in the Gaza Strip is secondary to the more important objective of the war: reestablishing Israel’s deterrence that collapsed within a matter of minutes on October 7. The war’s eventual victory photo should be created, above all, in accordance with this criterion.

Toppling the Hamas government, dismantling its military units, destroying its production infrastructure and its military capabilities, killing or neutralizing the majority of the Hamas commanders and its military forces, establishing a broad security perimeter along the entire length of the border, and maintaining effective security control in the area between Gaza and Egypt – all of these are parts of the overall puzzle that comprises the desired end state for Israel. When Hamas begins to sense that the sword is rapidly coming down on the necks of its leaders and Israel is determined to eradicate its presence in the Gaza Strip, it will be forced to make concessions on the hostage issue too.

Without delving any further into this, we can generally say that in the new surroundings that should evolve in Gaza, Israel will have to ensure the following interests:

1. Security for the Israeli communities located along the border with Gaza.
2. Prevention of acts of terrorism and military attacks.
3. Preserving the demilitarization: preventing any military armament, smuggling, or manufacture of weapons.
4. Preventing the existence of military frameworks, exercises, and other actions for the purpose of military force buildup.
5. Preventing Hamas' return to power and undermining its influence in the Gaza Strip or from it.
6. Preventing any negative influence it may wield from there on Judea and Samaria.
7. Reduction to the point of the removal of any responsibility in civil spheres.

In all their public statements regarding the "day after", the politicians have repeatedly chosen to define only what will not be in the Gaza Strip: a Hamas government, an Israeli government, the PA (Palestinian Authority), military capabilities threatening Israel and limiting its freedom of action to engage in security activity.

These definitions leave room for only a limited number of alternatives: firstly – the establishment of a central government based on local players with no links to Hamas and who do not represent the PA. Muhammad Dahlan is a name that has already been bandied about in this context, creating expectations based on extremely shaky, unstable foundations.

Secondly – the establishment of regional administrative bodies to be appointed from among the local clans to run civil affairs in their immediate vicinity. The role of a central government could be fulfilled by a form of "executive council" composed of representatives from a broad spectrum of countries willing to do so. This international involvement should also provide a solution to the sources of finance needed to fund all this.

Thirdly – an external centralized setup for running the Gaza Strip's affairs, by an international committee based on international mechanisms and institutions, that will operate local elements for this purpose.

Truth be told, the chances of success of these types of administrative models, especially given the almost impossible current conditions prevailing in the Gaza Strip, are extremely slender.

Hamas' power among the Gazan population, the extent to which it pervades all aspects of life, its well-oiled organizational capacity, and its military strength, will not allow any other entity to bypass it. Any player who decides not to cooperate with Hamas will be regarded by large swathes of the local population as wholly illegitimate. At best it will lose its power to govern and in a worst-case scenario, it might also lose its life.

The danger we face is that in the absence of a viable alternative, Israel will be forced to opt for a solution we may define as "the lesser of two evils". Though this 'lesser evil' might currently not be affiliated with Hamas, in the course of time this solution might readily develop into a Hamas proxy, either openly or via discreet contact. We might then find ourselves working in the Gaza Strip with a puppet administration that is de facto ruled by Hamas and operates at Hamas' beck and call. As such, we would be unable to harm it for fear of being accused of eradicating Gaza's new hope. Israel would be better advised to maintain the Gaza Strip as an area devoid of any solution than an area with a poor solution such as this.

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