Hamas seeks to survive Israel's offensive and shatter Israel's image as "invincible"

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 02.02.2024

Hamas is using the hostages not only to bring about an end to the war but also to ensure the continuation of its rule in the strip, to leverage its achievements, and to shore up its tarnished image among the public in Gaza and the West Bank, which is paying the price of the massacre of October 7.

The price that Israel will be required to pay for the first stage of the new deal is the risk of ending the war without toppling Hamas' rule while releasing terrorists who will significantly strengthen the organization's capabilities, especially in the West Bank.

The Israeli leadership's statements in which they have vowed to achieve all the goals of the war are important, but they are not enough. Since Hamas assumes that the domestic situation in Israel will affect the motivation to resume fighting, it is incumbent that a broad Israeli consensus emerge to continue the fighting after the ceasefire is over. US support for the move is also important, although it is not certain that it can be obtained at a bearable price.

As part of the emerging deal, Israel should seek to ensure that terrorists released from its prisons do not return to the West Bank, or if that is not possible – security officials must formulate a plan to offset the expected threat this could create to Israel. These steps should be taken to allow Israel to be able to go ahead with a deal, but under conditions that significantly reduce the risks it entails.

Just like in the previous round, Hamas hopes that the ceasefire that would accompany the first part of the deal will become a turning point in the war. But this time, perhaps as a lesson from that deal, it wants to stretch the ceasefire over a longer period – about six weeks or more.

In its view, the long period will curb the IDF's momentum and have everyone get used to a reality of non-combat, change Israel's day-to-day focus to the point that it would be hard to resume fighting and increase pressure on it from Washington.

The large number of hostages it holds allows Hamas to take risks. It believes that the detainees that would not be released in the first stage of the new deal could provide additional leverage if it fails to achieve all this.

In the meantime, the ceasefire will allow it to rehabilitate. Hamas will also use this time to replenish ammunition, gather updated intelligence, formulate operational plans, and, of course, also reassert its authority on the population.

Israel will also have to pay for the deal by releasing terrorists. Paradoxically, if fighting resumes, releasing such terrorists into the rubble of Gaza and Khan Younis may actually bring them closer to their deaths. But the perceptual and operational damage to Israel caused by their release will have already been done.

The release of West Bank terrorists held in Israel will greatly strengthen Hamas' standing among the Palestinian residents there and bolster its image, which has been damaged as a result of the suffering caused because of the war.

For Hamas, the release of terrorists to the West Bank will not only boost it politically but also an opportunity to intensify its terrorist operations and force Israel to contend with another front simultaneously. The IDF and Shin Bet will be required to further intensify their counterterrorism efforts. They have excelled in this endeavor, and it has been moving forward full steam ahead.

It can be assumed that towards the end of the ceasefire in Gaza, Hamas will try to have the cessation of hostilities become permanent through a semi-official arrangement with Qatar and Egypt. It will likely set a whole host of conditions for the release of the rest of the captives it holds, including the release of top terrorists from Israeli prisons, the IDF's withdrawal from Gaza border areas to the October 6 lines, an Israeli pledge to refrain from "ground invasions" and targeted killings, and international guarantees to launch a Gaza reconstruction program.

The way Hamas sees it, these are the necessary components for creating the narrative that it had won – first, by having dealt the initial blow on Israel, and then by surviving the offensive and extracting various concessions from Israel. This will give it everlasting fame among Palestinians and shatter Israel's image as "invincible".

From Israel's point of view, such a denouement would be intolerable. It could

make it vulnerable to existential threats from its enemies on all fronts and severely undermine its standing in the region, which relies heavily on its security might.

Under these circumstances, Israel must get the job done and meet all its objectives. It must ensure there is a clear-cut victory – a knock-out blow to Hamas, not just a better score.

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