

Intensify the military pressure on Hamas

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 19.01.2024

In his statement to the media to mark 100 days since Oct. 7m, IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi spoke on the approval of operational plans to continue fighting and increase military pressure on Hamas, emphasizing that “this pressure, and only it, has succeeded in bringing back many captives so far. We have to revisit the circumstances under which the previous hostage deal was made in order to understand why Hamas is not rushing to finalize another such deal. This illustrates the scale of the challenge facing Israel on the way to defeating it.

What made Hamas agree back then to a deal that saw the release of about 100 captives in exchange for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid? First and foremost, it was the desire to stop the momentum of the Israeli attack and open a path that would lead, in a gradual process, to a complete cessation of the war. The scope of casualties and extensive destruction caused by Israel’s airstrikes within a relatively short period of time, along with images of hundreds of thousands of Gazans fleeing southward, increased pressure on the terrorist organization. Hamas had realized that it needed to understand the situation and improve its grip had become critical, compounded by the blockade of the strip, which caused severe shortages of fuel and food, posing a threat not only to Hamas’ ability to govern but also to its terrorists’ survival inside the tunnels.

The cohesive stance of Israeli society around the determined message – “This time we are going all the way” – together with international political backing for its actions, also reinforced Hamas’ understanding that the Israeli operation would be a protracted one. The large number of hostages allowed the organization to give up some of them without worrying about losing its bargaining power in later stages. Hamas even saw it as an opportunity to release hostages whose continued captivity was a burden on the organization and thus gain points that would shore up its image after the barbaric ISIS-style attack on Oct. 7.

So how have the circumstances changed since? The initial shock in Gaza has passed and residents are beginning to adapt to the difficult reality. The IDF has pulled out some of its forces and the Israeli campaign is more pinpointed,

concentrated mainly in the Khan Yunis sector. It is intense, but unfolds in parameters Hamas has prepared for well. Fuel, food, and logistical support have resumed, as has the presence of residents and terrorists in areas recently defined as combat zones. Hamas can now assert itself as a governing entity to a certain extent. Political pressure on Israel has increased, Israelis are no longer rallying around the flag as before and the efforts to “court” Hamas to agree to a deal have intensified, through Egyptian and Qatari mediation efforts.

Such circumstances do not add pressure on Hamas to enter a deal; they only serves its “waiting-out and wear down Israel” strategy it has pursued, as it provides the terrorist organization with the hope that it could withstand the Israeli attack and leverage the “bargaining chips” in its hands to ensure its continued existence as a military and governing entity in the Strip. For Israel, this is an intolerable scenario that will shape a problematic reality not only vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip but on all fronts of the axis of resistance led by Iran.

What is the right course of action? As stated by Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi in his remarks, the goals set for the war are hard to achieve and require patience. Continued public support for the IDF’s activities is vital, especially in dealing with an enemy that knows Israeli society well and plans its moves with awareness of its sensitivities.

Pressure on Hamas is key if we want to achieve progress on the captives issue as well. But given that limited time at Israel’s disposal, the intensity and focus of the pressure must be tailored to achieve the desired effect quickly. Thus, instead of preferring moderate intensity over an extended period, it is best to increase intensity over a shorter duration.

On a practical level, it is appropriate to step up airstrikes in any area where ground forces have been reduced. Hamas must not be allowed to establish governance in these areas. Hamas terrorists and officials should be targeted wherever they try to renew their presence. Likewise, Israel should prevent residents from returning to the northern part of the Gaza Strip and designate any area with tunnels as a combat zone.

Diplomatic constraints, it is safe to assume, have prevented Israel from doing the obvious -- reducing humanitarian aid. But even so, Israel can at least prevent Hamas from diverting it to its own needs. Armed Hamas operatives or activists of

any kind should be targets for Israeli strikes. It will not be possible to topple Hamas' rule if its people continue to take the humanitarian aid rather than let the people have this vital commodity.

It is still not too late to set up de-escalation zones for distributing humanitarian aid – thereby depriving Hamas of controlling the aid shipments. This could be incorporated into plans for the Rafah area.

Targeted killings of Hamas leaders abroad should continue. This will not only add to Israel's deterrence, but it will also increase pressure on Hamas and Qatar regarding the captives.

As important as all of the above – maintaining Israeli solidarity as one people. In the spirit of the Golani commander's call to his soldiers – we must bring the cohesion we experienced at the front to the home front. This is a prerequisite for achieving the goals of the war on all fronts and accelerating the return of the captives.

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