

Israel's primary consideration is restoring deterrence

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 16.08.2024

"From a military standpoint, Israel has achieved all it can in Gaza," a senior American official told The New York Times on the eve of the summit in Doha. In their attempt to explain the futility of continuing the war, they actually underscored its necessity.

Israel cannot afford to end the war with the impression that it cannot topple Hamas. If this becomes the conclusion of its enemies and other actors in the region, it would significantly harm its efforts to achieve the central (though undeclared) goal of the war: restoring deterrence. Moreover, Israel cannot relinquish the gains it has made at such a high cost, and certainly cannot hand Hamas a lifeline or provide conditions that would enable its recovery.

It is worth reiterating: Even after Israel's impressive military achievements, much work remains to destroy Hamas's military and governmental capabilities. The rocket fire over the past week is a reminder of this. Hamas also maintains control over the distribution of humanitarian aid within Gaza and is able to present a coordinated stance, despite the conditions its leaders are in. However, as long as the IDF controls the Philadelphi Route and continues to operate within the Gaza Strip, it is eroding Hamas's capabilities, undermining its public standing, and forcing it to focus all its efforts on one goal: survival. Not growth, not empowerment, only mere existence.

The path to an arrangement - a turning point

Entering the path of an arrangement would be a turning point in this reality. The chances of renewing the fighting afterward are slim, if they exist at all. If the "deal" is implemented as agreed, some of its components would include the withdrawal of the IDF, the release of terrorists, the rehabilitation of Gaza, and the complete end of the war. In such a scenario, Israel would find it difficult to backtrack on its commitments to the U.S., Egypt, and Qatar.

But even if only part of the deal is implemented, Israel would still struggle to resume the fighting. Hamas would continue its manipulations and psychological

warfare, mediating countries would present new initiatives, the U.S. would increase pressure especially as the elections approach, the international community would join in, and domestic pressures would intensify. The de-escalation process has its own momentum. Hamas, and not just Hamas, is banking on this.

Reports from Washington about the Americans' intention to propose compromise suggestions on issues where the parties fail to reach an agreement should cause concern in Israel. The U.S.'s ability to influence Hamas to change its positions is minimal, if it exists at all. Against this backdrop, it is likely that the compromise formulas would erode Israel's positions, as Israel is more sensitive to American pressures and incentives. For Hamas, such reports are yet another reason to dig in.

Dilemmas in Israel

The dilemma in Israel revolves around two issues: the release of hostages and the connection between the Gaza war and the confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah. In both, the element of time plays a significant role. While time allows for deepening achievements in Gaza and reaching the release of hostages under better conditions, it also increases the danger to the hostages' safety. The element of time creates tension between the importance of toppling Hamas and the urgency of releasing the hostages.

There is no one in Israel who doesn't long for the release of the hostages, just as there is no one who doesn't desire the total defeat of the monstrous terrorist organization. Resolving the tension between these goals is akin to the expression "caught between a rock and a hard place." Any decision the government makes is legitimate, provided that its costs are clear and understood. In this regard, and after having been burned for years, it is not enough to rely on soothing statements or vague commitments that will sink into the sands of Rafah and the tunnels of Philadelphi.

As for the tension with Iran and Hezbollah, the very idea of offering concessions to "calm" them contradicts one of the objectives of the actions that heightened the tension: deterring these elements. In any case, it's difficult to see the Gaza war as the key to calming them. The formula that the U.S. is trying to promote—restraining Israel in Gaza in exchange for restraining Iran towards

Israel—does not satisfy Nasrallah and seemingly does not address Iran's appetite for revenge.

But even if it did, from Israel's perspective, it can only be relevant if it provides a solution to the root problems with these adversaries, primarily the efforts to obtain nuclear weapons and the desire to destroy Israel. Without diminishing the importance of diplomatic efforts, it is suggested to continue focusing the majority of efforts on strengthening readiness, both in defense and offense.

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