Projecting Strength for a Long Haul Forward

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 10.11.2023

At the end of the second week of the ground attack in the Gaza Strip, the IDF continues to advance toward its goals. With the general siege on the strip and control over the city of Gaza, accompanied by artillery and air support, the IDF has deepened its activities in captured areas, purging the terrain so that it can no longer serve the enemy combatants or be used for production and storage of weapons, or for other terror-related matters while ratcheting up the pressure on other parts in the heart of the city.

Simultaneously, the air force has been carrying out targeted strikes based on the intelligence constantly being fed by the IDF and the Shin Bet security agency. The focus in the northern part of the strip doesn't spare other areas from combat, where the IDF has been attacking there as well – from land, air, and sea. The main challenge for ground forces now is dealing with Hamas' warfare, using underground tunnels, humanitarian facilities, and exploiting civilians as shields. The emphasis has shifted from width to depth in the current stage of the ground offensive.

From what can be gleaned through the justifiable IDF veil of ambiguity is that the war has been prosecuted well; the IDF conduct has projected professionalism, as a well-oiled machine with precise and close jointness among the various services and agencies. Throughout the fighting, there has been a quick learning process, with the preliminary debriefings being shared among the troops and the various areas of operation. This all serves as a force multiplier and enhances the overall effectiveness of the offensive and defensive arrays.

Beyond this, this carries paramount importance against Israel's other enemies, who observe and scrutinize its conduct as a basis for their decisions in the present or future. If the thought of waiting until the IDF weakens in Gaza crossed Hezbollah's leaders' minds – so that it could move against Israel only after Israel had been exhausted – it is now clear that they are likely disabused of this, and are now expecting to face a strong, well-trained, and honed army, unlike anything before the Gaza war. The IDF's conduct so far has radiated power. There's also

optimism regarding the attainment of the overarching goals.

But for all the gains thus far, there is a ways to go before achieving the war's objectives. The political echelon has instructed the IDF to deal a critical blow to the enemy's capabilities – both its governing ability and military strength. The campaign is not designed to simply exact a price or establish deterrence; the expectation is victory, not just "an image of victory."

Reaching these goals requires time and a methodic, extensive, and prolonged effort; we won't get there through some limited strike or limited operation. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who has stood alongside Israel since Hamas' attack, mentioned during his visit to Tel Aviv that he was the one who planned the American war against ISIS. "I know ISIS well. We have your back," he said. He knows more than anyone else how long it could take to crush Hamas. The comparison between Hamas and ISIS, usually used to illustrate their monstrous behavior, also applies to how to deal with them. Namely, one has to appreciate the complexity and time such an undertaking involves.

Where are we headed? Three stages can be outlined in the reality that will emerge in Gaza. The first, which we are in the midst of, will be defined by the war to topple Hamas' rule and destroy its capabilities. The fighting will occur with varying intensity across the strip for a not-so-brief period. The end of this stage won't be clear cut and probably won't be uniform across the strip. It will then overlap with the beginning of the second stage, characterized by a void of governance in the area. The resulting chaos will lead to internal power struggles within the strip, likely prompting local initiatives to manage civil affairs and undoubtedly exert pressure on Israel to allow more humanitarian aid and let the Palestinian Authority enter the fray. The temporary chaos is likely an inevitable stage in the process of fully purging Hamas from all the ruling power foci in the Gaza Strip. The third stage will herald the new reality after the Hamas era. It's hard to predict how this stage will unfold as it will be influenced by numerous variables and interconnected scenarios.

The guiding principles for Israel's policy at all stages are clear: maintaining Israel's security operational freedom without any constraints; preventing Hamas from ruling the Gaza Strip; preventing the formation of a military threat; and relieving Israel from responsibility for civilian issues.

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